RELIGION AND POLITICS IN PALESTINE

The case of Hamas

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This chapter seeks to unpack the complex relationship between ideology and political practices in armed-political organisations by analysing how Hamas’s public theology – defined as the ‘reflection and implications of a religion in the activities that take place in the common space, including political and social life’ (Sandal, 2012: 69) – has shaped the group’s political agenda and behaviour as an armed group, a political party and a socio-political movement. The study emphasises the modalities and impact of the processes of religious reframing and reinterpretation spurred by the organisation’s complex and extensive political role, focusing on identifying Hamas’s efforts to strike a balance between ideology and political expediency.

In doing so, the chapter contributes to the growing body of international relations and comparative politics literature addressing the role of religion (and of ideology more broadly) in shaping political behaviour of armed groups (Fox and Sandler, 2004; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Sandal, 2012; Curtis and Sundre, 2019; Sanín and Wood, 2014). This is in contrast to a significant part of the post-Cold War literature on armed-political movements, which tends to either minimise the role of ideology or analyse it in mostly instrumental terms (Collier and Hoefler, 2004; Mampilly, 2011). The study posits that ideology, as ‘a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing it’ (Downs, 1967: 237), deeply shapes Hamas’s broader political narrative, including its claims, electoral programmes, mobilisation strategies and political performances (Van Engeland and Rudolph, 2008; Curtis and Sundre, 2019; Knight, 2006; Sartori, 1969). The chapter zooms in specifically on understanding how religious beliefs influence Hamas’s political behaviour, driven by the notion that religiously based ideological claims tend to be especially resilient and strengthen a group’s sense of identity, its perception of duty and its rejection of compromise. Indeed, a religiously grounded ideology can grant a powerful justification for the refusal to comply with established socio-political norms and boundaries that openly clash with established religious beliefs (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Juergensmeyer, 2000; Rapoport, 1984; Berti and Heifetz Knobel, 2015).

However, neither Hamas’s religious beliefs nor its political behaviour should be simply assumed as static. Indeed, public theology is inherently context-dependent and religious belief is itself ‘socially and politically contingent, it does not and cannot determine or prescribe a certain kind of politics’ (Sandal, 2012: 67; Bromley, 1997). Moreover, while deeply shaped by its
ideology and religious beliefs, Hamas’s political behaviour and practices are inherently connected to the evolution of the Palestinian political arena and continuously interacting with the broader socio-political milieu (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Alimi et al., 2012). Moreover, sustained participation in politics and governance has also influenced the organisation’s attitude and interpretation of its religiously held beliefs and contributed to Hamas’s ideological reframing, reinterpretation and repositioning through a dynamic process of accommodation of political expediency and ideological aspirations (Finn, 2000; O’Donnel and Schmitter, 1986).

**Hamas’s religious and political identity: the 1988 Charter**

Hamas is a sophisticated armed group, an Islamist political party and social movement. It is involved in administering and delivering social services, and, since 2007, the *de facto* government of the Gaza Strip. In the words of one of its historic leaders, Khaled Meshal:

> Hamas can be characterized as a comprehensive movement. It 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. It is not, for example, just an armed wing or a political party. It is all of these things. It is a fusion of all these dimensions.

*(Rabbani, 2008: 69)*

The organisation was officially established during the First Intifada in 1987 as the military wing of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Shortly after, in 1988, Hamas published the ‘Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement’, its official ideological manifesto. The document provides an overview of Hamas’s original political and religious ideology.

In the Charter, Hamas self-identifies as the Islamic and nationalist Palestinian resistance. Hamas’s religious identity, and specifically its Sunni, Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood affiliation, play a prominent role in shaping the group’s political discourse and strategic vision as expressed in the Charter, articulating an overall universalistic, exclusionist and militant vision (Shultz, 1995). The Charter is itself deeply infused with historical and religious references, in line with Hamas’s aspirations to define the Palestinian struggle also in religious terms and, in doing so, to clearly differentiate itself from the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s essentially secular identity (Milton-Edwards, 2017). At the same time, Hamas’s Charter does not reject nationalism in favour of a broader Pan-Islamic agenda; on the contrary it posits that nationalism and *wataniyya* (patriotism/nationalism) are equally important principles in shaping the organisation’s worldview. Indeed, over the years, Hamas has relied on ‘Islam to augment its nationalist credentials, rather than pull Palestinians into the wider pan-Islamic orbit’ (Dunning, 2015: 291).

The Charter grounds Hamas’s main objectives in a broader religious-nationalist framework. First, the organisation’s main stated goals – *muqawama* (resistance) as a comprehensive framework (Najib and Friedrich, 2008) and the ‘liberation of Palestine’, chiefly through armed struggle – are themselves presented and justified on the basis of the group’s public theology, albeit not exclusively. The Charter refers to mandatory Palestine as a *waqf* (religious trust), underlining its inherent sanctity, indivisibility and its status as belonging to the entire Muslim *Ummah*. An important corollary of this statement is that Hamas’s objective of ‘liberating Palestine’ serves both the Palestinian national cause as well as that of the broader *Ummah*. In addition, if the Palestinian land is a religious trust belonging to the entire *Ummah*, it follows that no individual or organisation should ever be entitled to forfeit the rights on Palestine. This framing, in turn,
justifies the Charter’s explicit rejection of the possibility of accepting a negotiated settlement or a political compromise to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Hamas, 1993; Knudsen, 2005). What is more, by framing the group’s resistance as both a nationalist and a religious duty, and by specifically identifying armed struggle as a religiously based individual duty, Hamas is able to formulate a powerful call to action both towards fellow Palestinians as well as towards the broader Islamic world (Milton-Edwards, 2017). Importantly, some of the notions articulated in the Charter, including the primacy of the duty of jihad, have been further strengthened over time through the backing of religious leaders. For example, over the past decades, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardadawi’s *fatwas* (religious opinions) backing Hamas’s resistance agenda, sanctioning *istiham* (martyrdom) operations in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, or rejecting the Oslo peace process, have all contributed to strengthened the organisation’s overall religiously based claims (Polka, 2017). Backing by religious clerics is especially important for an organisation like Hamas, whose leadership has historically largely been composed of lay men.

Hamas’s broader political and social identity as expressed in the Charter is similarly shaped by the group’s religious ethos. With respect to domestic politics, Hamas’s political agenda draws on the Muslim Brotherhood’s call to Islamise and revive Muslim societies, emphasising the importance of education and social work (Knudsen, 2005). The Charter also indicates that the establishment of a system of government based on the principles of Sharia law represents the group’s main political aspirations with respect to the Palestinian political arena (Charter, 1988; Gunning, 2008). In addition, also building on the Muslim Brotherhood’s public theology, the Charter also stresses the importance of supporting a system of ‘mutual social responsibility’, stating that:

> Part of social welfare is providing aid to everyone who is in need of it, be it material, or spiritual, or collective cooperation to complete some works. And upon the members of Islamic Resistance Movement falls the responsibility of looking after the needs of the population as they would for their personal needs. (Charter, 1988: 129)

In turn, this commitment to social work lays the foundation for the group’s extensive social welfare network as well as for its political focus on social change and development (Palestinian Information Centre, 2005; Gunning, 2004; Klein, 2007; Løvlie, 2013).

The Charter hence squarely grounds Hamas’s main objectives, political goals and programmatic agenda in a broader religious context, highlighting the strong connection between the group’s political behaviour, its ideology and its local legitimacy and support. A key example is the link between the group’s religiously based ethos of solidarity, its social service network and practices, and the organisation’s political legitimacy (Szekely, 2015; Roy, 2011). Similarly, Hamas’s political resistance identity was initially built around the group’s claim to be the Islamist alternative to Fatah as well as the main catalyst of opposition to the Oslo Accords (Knudsen, 2005). In the words of historic Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzook: ‘Islam is a self-engine … against oppression and occupation, and against all the features that oppress people and offend them … Islam is a strong engine for people to refuse oppression, occupation, discrimination and so on’ (quoted in Dunning, 2015: 284).

**Hamas’s religious and political identity beyond the Charter**

At the same time, it would be extremely reductive to consider Hamas’s political agenda as solely a product of its religious beliefs, or to consider the Charter as the exclusive source of Hamas’s
ideology. Similarly, it would be highly inaccurate to regard religion only as a constraint, an obstacle to political participation or an inevitable foe of adaptation or pragmatism. For example, Hamas’s religiously grounded commitment to the principles of social work and solidarity have served a key role and allowed the group to develop a clear political agenda on socio-economic issues, while awarding the group credibility. Similarly, the group’s religiously framed opposition to the peace process facilitated the construction of a self-standing political identity that allowed Hamas to emerge as a political party and gain legitimacy and support. And whereas the religious framework set in the Charter generally lacks flexibility, Hamas has, over time, also relied on religious principles to enhance its ability to adapt to the evolving social, political and security environment. For instance, Hamas relies on wasatiyya (balance/flexibility/’centrism”), a religious jurisprudence interpretative framework established by Egyptian religious scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, to argue for the need to assume a balanced, ‘middle-of-road’/compromise position on issues where extreme and diverging religious interpretations exist, adopting a stance that takes maslaha (public interest) into consideration (Polka, 2017).

What is more, since its foundation and since the original publication of the Charter, Hamas has articulated a parallel political discourse that has allowed the group to combine the ideological beliefs expressed in the Charter with the shifting political and security circumstances on the ground, questioning the notion that political actors who ground their political vision within a broad religious framework ought to be inherently unable to adapt or modify their political beliefs or behaviour.

Although Hamas has never formally renounced its ultimate goal to liberate mandatory Palestine nor has it reversed its official rejection of the state of Israel, the organisation has, over time, developed a series of political concepts and religious interpretative frameworks that have provided the group with additional political and practical flexibility. A first important element of this reframing has been the crafting of a political discourse based on concepts such as the de facto, rather than the de jure, recognition of Israel and the possibility of pausing the struggle with Israel and reaching both short- and long-term ceasefires and truces. This notion has allowed the group to enter into ceasefire agreements with Israel without having to retract its Charter commitments (Mishal and Sela, 2000). According to Milton-Edwards, ceasefires have been used by Hamas both ‘for the purposes of tactical management of the conflict with Israel’ and as ‘a political entry point to negotiation of the conflict’ (Milton-Edwards, 2017: 218).

As early as 1993, the group’s historical leader Sheikh Yassin expressed his acceptance of a ten- or 20-year temporary hudna (truce) with Israel, provided a series of conditions were met (Scham and Abu-Irshaid, 2009). Similar offers, along with proposals for short-term ceasefires (or tah-di’ah), have since been reiterated by the group on several occasions (Tamimi, 2009). By incorporating the hudna discourse into its political vision, Hamas has been able to act on the basis of a de facto recognition of the existence of the state of Israel and the practical need to have to engage, directly or indirectly, with it, without having to retract its religiously grounded ‘non-recognition’ and ‘no engagement’ dogmas (Scham and Abu-Irshaid, 2009). Importantly, the group has articulated a discourse on the permissibility of ceasefires and temporary pauses in the armed conflict also on religious ground, thus never portraying its de facto political reframing in opposition to its religious beliefs (Hroub, 2000).

The hudna discourse also allowed the group to support and agree to participate in a Palestinian state in the pre-1967 borders without having to compromise its ultimate ideological premise that no compromise solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is acceptable. The group manages to participate in a political system which it ultimately does not wish to recognise by stating that participation does not equal acceptance and that the group can be involved in politics and even agree to a long-term hudna, as this is not the equivalent of forfeiting future generations’ rights to
'liberate Palestine’, but merely a ‘pause’ in the struggle. An example of how Hamas’s political leadership is able to articulate this message is provided by senior leader Mousa Abu Marzook. In a 2006 interview for an Israeli radio station, Marzook reiterated Hamas’s posture with respect to Israel and future negotiations. On that occasion, Marzook stated that Hamas was considering making changes according to reality: '[B]ut there are three principles we will not compromise on: government according to the laws of the sharia … our right to live in Palestine, and our right to resist the occupation’ (Halpern, 2006). Marzook added:

Relations with the Jewish State are inevitable as the existence of Israel is a fact, but recognizing its legal legitimacy is another thing … Hamas may recognize Israel’s legitimacy, under certain conditions, such as the establishment of a Palestinian state in ‘67 borders in the West Bank and Gaza with Jerusalem as its capital and the return of millions of refugees to their homes in Israel.

(Halpern, 2006)

In addition, over the past two decades, Hamas’s political discourse also shifted with respect to its domestic political agenda. On this issue, Hamas started to downplay the centrality of the Islamic state project and to emphasise other aspects of the group’s Islamic political agenda, such as its interests in fighting corruption or providing relief for indigents within society. In its 2004 electoral platform, for instance, mentions of the Islamic state project were minimised in favour of a rhetoric that endorsed socio-political and socio-economic issues (Hroub, 2006). More broadly, the 2004 electoral platform presented a political programme focused on social change, anti-corruption and transparency, as well as on development and poverty eradication (Palestinian Information Centre, 2005).

The 2005–2006 political campaign also gave Hamas a chance to explain how the group squared its investment in politics with its Charter-based commitment to focus on armed struggle. In an interview, then spokesman Sami Abu Zahra asserted: ‘Resistance is Hamas’ main focus, and we call for its continuation, but we also hope to become more involved in Palestinian society and provide services to the Palestinian people, hence our participation in these elections’, adding that: ‘It is our duty to progress, to move forward, to invest in infrastructure, and to invest in change and face challenges’ (Sukhtian, 2005). Importantly, this message, which the group has continued to reiterate in the following decade, successfully allowed Hamas to align political practices and ideological commitments. By branding the decision to participate in politics as complementary, not alternative, to armed struggle and by stressing that the prioritisation of politics was the result of a strategic decision rather than an ideological one, the group was able to ensure both internal cohesion and ideological continuity.

In parallel, Hamas’s public diplomacy with respect to the international community, especially in the aftermath of its 2006 participation in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections and its 2007 takeover of Gaza, has often downplayed the Charter’s significance, without however renouncing or denying its validity. For example, speaking about the Charter in a 2007 op-ed written for the Los Angeles Times, Mousa Abu Marzook wrote, ‘As for the 1988 charter, if every state or movement were to be judged solely by its foundational, revolutionary documents or the ideas of its progenitors, there would be a good deal to answer for on all sides’ (Marzook, 2007). In a similar vein, former head of the Political Bureau Khaled Meshal argued in a 2009 New York Times interview that:

The most important thing is what Hamas is doing and the policies it is adopting today. The world must deal with what Hamas is practicing today. Hamas has accepted the
national reconciliation document. It has accepted a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders including East Jerusalem, dismantling settlements, and the right of return based on a long term truce. Hamas has represented a clear political program through a unity government. This is Hamas’s program regardless of the historic documents. Hamas has offered a vision. Therefore, it’s not logical for the international community to get stuck on sentences written 20 years ago. It’s not logical for the international community to judge Hamas based on these sentences and stay silent when Israel destroys and kills our people.

(Meshaal, 2009)

Nor has Hamas’s religious framework as articulated in the 1988 Charter prevented the organisation from further debating and adapting its overall ideological framework based on the evolving political and security environment. Indeed, in 2017, Hamas published an updated ideological manifesto. This document, the ‘Document of General Principles and Policies’, released in Doha in May 2017, does preserve a core continuity with the 1988 Charter, but its tone is far less millenarian and exclusionist, with fewer religiously grounded references and with only a general assertion that ‘Islam – for Hamas – provides a comprehensive way of life and an order that is fit for purpose at all times and in all places’ (Middle East Eye, 2017). The 2017 document also relies on constructive vagueness (Yaghi, 2006) to smooth some of the ideological hard edges in the original text without however downright contradicting the 1988 text. For example, while the 2017 document drops all references to Palestine as a waqf, it still portrays the Palestinian cause as a central one for the Ummah (Hroub, 2017). Similarly, the 2017 document reiterates the need to pursue the full liberation of Palestine while also adding:

without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus.

(Middle East Eye, 2017; Hroub, 2017)

The 2017 political-ideological manifesto also softens the group’s domestic political vision by stating that the organisation is committed to a sovereign Palestinian state, in favour of ‘pluralism, democracy, national partnership, acceptance of the other and the adoption of dialogue’, and that it aspires to build ‘Palestinian national institutions on sound democratic principles, foremost among them are free and fair elections’ (Middle East Eye, 2017).

This brief account of Hamas’s political and religious identity highlights both the importance of religion and religiously grounded beliefs in shaping the organisation’s overall ethos, objectives, strategy and call to action. At the same time, even a cursory look at Hamas’s religious-political ideology stresses the evolving and context-dependent relationship the organisation has developed with its own religious framework. The same continuous dialectic relation between ideology and expediency has also shaped Hamas’s behaviour as a political party over the past three decades.

**Religion and political behaviour: Hamas as a political party**

Hamas has a long historical record of political participation both in grassroots and institutional politics, has competed in multiple elections and has been involved in the provision of governance both at the subnational and national level.
Hamas first became involved in grassroots politics shortly after its establishment in the late 1980s. At that time, the organisation began to take part in what the group described as ‘non-political popular elections’, by competing to be elected in boards of educational and professional associations, including in universities, workplaces and trade unions (Zahhar and Hijazi, 1995: 82). Building on the Muslim Brotherhood’s legacy of social work and on its outward social orientation, the group also built its political brand around its Islamist identity and social welfare orientation. In parallel, Hamas’s early behaviour as a political movement was largely shaped by its resistance agenda and specifically its political and armed opposition to the peace process that had emerged between Israel and the PLO. Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Hamas quickly rose as the leader of the ‘rejectionist camp’ and the main political and ideological challenger to the PLO and Fatah (Berti, 2013; Salah, 2017). This challenge was both ideological, by framing the Palestinian struggle in religious terms and by arguing for the need or an Islamist alternative to the secular-nationalist Palestinian movement, and political – grounded on the rejection of the peace process. Through this dual Islamist and resistance agenda, Hamas gradually affirmed itself as the main grassroots political opposition movement in the Palestinian arena. Achieving this status also led the organisation on more than one occasion to invest in establishing broad issue-based coalitions, including with secular and leftist parties (Berti, 2013). An example is the Ten Resistance Organisation (TRO) Hamas led in the 1990s to coordinate the anti-Oslo political camp (Hroub, 2000).

At the same time, the group did not position itself against institutional politics per se. For example, in a 1989 interview, Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin said that the organisation would accept any electoral result, including the victory of a non-Islamist force. He added that ‘There is no other way to choose representatives of the people except the way of elections’. Two years later, a Hamas communiqué also stated the same principle and made clear that no political force should be able to represent the ‘masses’ without having won ‘free, honest, and neutral elections’ (Piscatori, 2000: 37).

The transition from grassroots socio-political movement to fully-fledged political party was gradual and complex for Hamas, also due to the ideological tensions surrounding the question of political participation. Hamas first discussed whether to create a parallel institutional political party to take part in electoral politics in the mid-1990s, following the Oslo Accords and the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994. The creation of the PA led, in turn, to the 1996 Palestinian legislative elections (Berti, 2013). In those years, Hamas’s political agenda became increasingly unpopular within Palestine, especially as its ideological rigidity came to be seen as a liability, rather than an asset. In the years immediately following the creation of the PA, Palestinian public opinion, hopeful that the peace process would succeed, strongly aligned with Fatah, with only 15 percent of Palestinians supporting Islamist groups by mid-1998 (Shikaki, 1998). Similarly, by 1996, support for armed struggle had hit an all-time low, with only approximately 20 percent of Palestinians expressing support for political violence (Matesan, 2012). Facing the prospect of decline pushed Hamas to think seriously about investing in becoming an institutionalised political party and in participating in the first Palestinian legislative elections as a way to restore popularity and legitimacy (Roy, 2000).

However, the possibility of pursuing political participation brought the question of harmonising ideology and pragmatism to the forefront of the organisation’s strategic debate. On the one hand, Hamas’s political leaders in Gaza – where Hamas was the strongest in terms of legitimacy and presence on the ground – asserted that the organisation needed to take part in the electoral race, claiming that investing in politics would not undermine or distract from the group’s overall resistance agenda (Klein, 2009; Kristianesen, 1999). On the other hand, Hamas’s military wing, the Qassam Brigades, continued to place emphasis on carrying out violent
operations against Israel, without becoming directly involved in the question of advancing political participation. Diaspora-based leaders were on the other hand extremely critical of entering institutional politics and against any type of cooperation with the PA: estranged from daily life in Palestine, they saw compromise through far more critical and ideological eyes, arguing that political participation may not only detract from resistance, but also weaken Hamas’s ideological commitment to armed struggle or lead to accept political compromise (Kurz and Nahman, 1997). Indeed, from an ideological perspective, a number of prominent leaders within Hamas perceived a tension between preserving the Charter-based, religiously grounded rejection of negotiations and political compromises, and deciding to take part in the elections, seeing the latter as tantamount to recognising the Oslo process they had so vehemently opposed (Mishal and Sela, 2000; Baconi, 2015). At the same time, the decision not to take part in the electoral contest was not grounded on ideological considerations alone: Hamas also asserted that taking part in the legislative elections was politically problematic and likely to be counter-productive as Fatah and its political leader, Yasser Arafat, de facto controlled the Palestinian political system (Mishal and Sela, 2000). Ultimately, a combination of ideological commitment and pragmatic considerations led the group to decide to refrain from competing in elections (Kristianasen, 1999).

Yet, even though Hamas officially shied away from taking part in the 1996 elections, the debate on the legitimacy of political participation had a long-term impact on the group, leading Hamas to invest more resources in the provision of social and political goods and in grassroots politics as a deliberate strategy to deal with the group’s perceived loss of popularity and legitimacy (Roy, 2000, 2011). These investments in politics laid the groundwork for Hamas’s later decision to participate in the 2004–2005 municipal elections, as well as in the 2006 legislative contest.

Indeed, Hamas’s decision to invest in institutional politics occurred a decade later, in 2004, when the organisation decided to take part in Palestinian municipal and national elections as a political party. This choice was influenced by a number of factors, including the demise of the Oslo process, the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004 and the subsequent ‘opening’ of the political arena, and the general decline in the levels of public support for armed struggle (Gunning, 2008; Berti, 2013). What is more, the rising weakness and internal conflict in Fatah (Shikaki, 2002), the crisis of governance of the PA, as well as Hamas’s regained popularity in the wake of the Second Intifada and after Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, all pushed the organisation towards attempting to translate its grassroots popularity into political support (International Crisis Group, 2006). It is important to note how little ideological considerations shaped the 2004–2006 debate: Hamas de facto sidelined its constitutive objection to political participation in the institutions created by the Oslo Accords by stating that that system had been destroyed by the Second Intifada, whilst saying very little about the legitimacy of taking part in secular elections (Berti, 2013; Herzog, 2006). By formally competing in the Palestinian municipal and Legislative Council elections, the group de facto went beyond its ideological rejection of the status quo, making it far less consequential to its overall political identity. At the same time, the formal entry into institutional politics did not lead the group to formally retract or renounce on any of its ideological beliefs and commitments. Hamas was indeed able to justify its participation by arguing that the Oslo-driven peace process and its political legacy were, for all intents and purposes, dead (Herzog, 2006); while also asserting that its political activities would be carried out in the framework of, and complementary to, the broader resistance agenda.

This balance between ideological coherence, political reframing and expediency also played a significant role in the immediate aftermath of Hamas’s electoral victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. Indeed, in the post-2006 victory, the group’s willingness to enter into unity government deals with its political and ideological foe, Fatah, stressed Hamas’s
internal struggle to balance ideology and pragmatism and to reform, rather than dramatically reshape, the political system (Berti, 2016; Sen, 2015). Ultimately, however, Hamas’s and Fatah’s inability to bridge their historical, ideological and political rift led to a de facto split of the Palestinian arena between the Hamas-controlled Gaza and the Palestinian Authority-ruled West Bank. As a result, Hamas rose to become the de facto ruler of Gaza. Again, a very brief examination of Hamas’s governance of Gaza since 2007 shows a mixed record in terms of implementing ‘religiously based’ governance. Since 2007, Hamas’s ‘Islamisation’ policies have focused more on reforms at the social, rather than at the high-institutional, level. For example, while changes have occurred in the realm of education, or with respect to gender equality or by introducing ‘morality policing’, among others, still there have not been revolutionary changes to the institutional and legislative institutions in place (Pelham, 2010; Milton-Edwards, 2007).

In sum, Hamas’s political behaviour and governance practices have emerged as a result of a reiterative discursive reframing process seeking to accommodate political expediency and ideological aspirations. In the process, governance practices and ideological beliefs are contested, reshaped and adapted over time.

Conclusion

Hamas’s political identity is deeply rooted in the group’s overall resistance framework, itself shaped around the organisation’s Islamist identity as outlined in the 1988 Charter. At the same time, an analysis of Hamas’s political discourse and behaviour underlines that neither is ideology a static concept, nor is the group’s own interpretation of its own religious beliefs inflexible. To the contrary, there is an ongoing dialectic tension between the need for ideological continuity and coherence and the necessity to respond to external changes to their broader socio-political milieu. This results in a twin process of developing a political discourse that reframes core ideological beliefs and, without rejecting them, seeks to reinterpret them in a way that allows to maximise political expediency.

In the process, Hamas has adapted and sharpened its political agenda and platform, while continuing to rely on its pre-existing ‘cultural, religious and symbolic frames’ to preserve internal unity, project coherence and maintain a distinct and able political brand (Long, 2010).

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