Understanding Hamas

Remarks on Three Different and Interrelated Theoretical Approaches[1]

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Abstract: This study distinguishes between three interwoven theoretical approaches prevalent in writings of researchers seeking to understand the emergence of the Islamic Resistance Movement, "Hamas." The first of these approaches examines the movement from the portal of ideology, stressing the importance of international and regional dimensions and the rise of political Islam after the 1967 War. The second approaches Hamas as a social movement organization seeking to revisit the historical narrative of Palestinian society. The third considers Hamas to be the heir of the Palestinian national liberation movement, attributing its rise to transformations witnessed in Palestinian identity and the Palestinian political imagination. Although the three readings do not contradict each other, a focus on one of them can lead to oversimplification or exaggeration. Overemphasis on the first approach could marginalize social agency at the micro level; emphasis on the second approach can result in the overestimation of the agency of collective action; exaggerated emphasis on the third approach deprives social actors of their agency. Hence this study proposes situating Hamas in the intersection of these three approaches.

Hamas | Social Movements | Identity Politics | Research Methods | Political Islam

Introduction: Understanding Hamas

The Islamic Resistance Movement (*Ḥarakat al-Muqāwama al-Islāmiyya*), more commonly known by the acronym Hamas, officially launched its struggle against Zionism on the eve of the First Intifada in 1987, more than two and a half decades after the foundation of Fateh, its main rival in Palestinian politics. At its founding, it represented both the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood organisation, and at the same time, a generational rebellion against it. Since then, Hamas has followed its own unique trajectory, leaving its own special mark on the Palestinian national struggle. Its innovative approach allowed it within the space of a decade to turn a Gazan home-made rocket, which once seemed so primitive, into a threat significant enough to work as a bargaining chip. Its armed wing, which began life as a scattered force of small local groups, is now becoming a professionally organised army boasting dozens of units.

This paper focuses on three distinct, albeit interrelated, theoretical approaches that have dominated the literature on Hamas. All three approaches focus heavily on the cultural dimension but vary in that they place the central emphasis on ideology, society and identity respectively. The first approach, which analyses Hamas as an *Islamist* movement on the basis of ideology, relies heavily on discourse analysis. The second approach analyses it as a *social movement*, emphasising collective social action as a relatively rational endeavour. The third approach sees Hamas in the context of transformations within Palestinian national identity and the transformations of the Palestinian community's political imagination, positioning the movement as the latest incarnation of the Palestinian national liberation movement.

Despite the importance of all these different approaches, adopting one at the expense of the others inevitably

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means neglecting certain crucial points and, ultimately, either oversimplification or alarmism. I thus propose to locate Hamas at the intersection of these three approaches.

1. Hamas as an Islamist Movement

Perhaps the "easiest" starting point for those studying Hamas is to approach it as an Islamist movement by way of discourse analysis. This has the advantage of positioning Hamas as part of a whole. The "part" is a tradition of socialisation and organised activism that combines the spiritual and the temporal, makes preachers into politicians and recasts modern political language in "pure" terminology of antique provenance: the Umma or community of Muslims replaces the nation, *shūra* or "consultation" replaces governance.

The "whole," meanwhile, is not simply a matter of Hamas's connections to the Muslim Brotherhood movement. It is also about seeing Hamas as one of the many manifestations of a new political imaginary that emerged in the wake of the 1967 defeat and became deeply entrenched after Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979. This political imaginary has transformed Islam into a revolutionary ideology – or, more precisely, has "Islamised" revolution.[3] The pan-Arabists had imagined every Arab country as part of a single vast "motherland" and their inhabitants as members of a single nation which aspired to sovereign status. The new imaginary, in contrast, expanded the boundaries of this prospective sovereign entity to include every member of the Community of the Believers. In theoretical terms, in fact, it is limitless. But in practice — i.e., in multicultural societies — it has put many, many limits in place.[4]

In recent decades much has been written about the historical dynamics that contributed to the rise of political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa. The literature has stressed the importance of numerous factors, including the "ruralisation" of cities and its role in the spread of social conservatism;[5] the eclipse of Arab nationalism after the 1967 War, leaving a void filled by the ideology of popular culture;[6] the role of the Islamic Revolution in Iran;[7] the negative effects of the state-building process;[8] and the entrenchment of inequality during the oil boom of the 1970s, which helped make Islam into an ideology of protest.[9] This is without mentioning the global tendency towards "re-traditionalisation" and the turn towards a right-wing identity politics.[10] The common denominator between all these various readings is their emphasis on large-scale changes at the macro level and the key role played by ideology.

Approaching Hamas as an Islamist movement certainly offers some important insights, particularly with regard to its foundational period in the 1970s and 1980s. At that critical juncture, the ooccupied Palestinian territories (OPT) were experiencing a series of radical transformations, the product of the various historical dynamics generated by life under occupation and by conditions in which "economic problems overlapped with social and political grievance, resulting in an explosive political mix."[11]

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3   Shireen T. Hunter, "Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1988), pp. 730-749.

4   Dale Eickelman & James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chapter 2.

5   Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1993), Chapter 4, especially: pp. 65-70; Ilan Pappé, *The Modern Middle East*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 99-100; J. Gulick, "Village and City: Cultural Continuities in the Twentieth Century," in: I. Lapidus (ed.), *Middle Eastern Cities: A Symposium on Ancient, Islamic, and Contemporary Middle Eastern Urbanism* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1986), pp. 122-158

6   Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 84; Galal Amin, *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians? Changes in Egyptian Society from 1950 to the Present* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000).

7   Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 114-115.

8   Hinnebusch.

9   Ibid.

10   Bassam Tibi, "Egypt as a Model of Development for the World of Islam," in: Lawrence E. Harrison & Peter L. Berger, *Developing Cultures: Case Studies* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 166.

11   Helga Baumgarten, *Min al-Taḥrīr ilā al-Dawla: Tārīkh al-Ḥaraka al-Waṭaniyya al-Falisṭīniyya* 1967-1993, Mohammad Abu Zeid (trans.) (Ramallah: Muwatin, 2006), p. 310.

All this contributed to the production of a large and novel social stratum receptive to political mobilisation but prevented by class and social conditions from taking part in organised political activity. It also contributed to a major shift in the forms of Palestinian political mobilisation, ultimately leading to the eclipse of the traditional political elite — an elite that was fragile in any case[12] — and the coalescence of a new political community deeply invested in the statist idea represented by the PLO, which gave the modern Palestinian national movement an unmatched infusion of fresh energy.[13] But while these different dynamics, which will be discussed below, were reinforced by the influence and political heft of the PLO, they also provided fertile ground for the rapid parallel development of the Islamist movement in Palestine and for a veritable "generational rebellion" within that movement.

a. Radical Transformations in the OPT: Demography, Education, Economy and Settler Colonialism

In the second half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Israel was hit by a sharp economic downturn. Annual GDP growth fell to zero, and a market that had long been hungry for labour became suddenly incapable of absorbing its excess workforce. This had serious repercussions for the people of the occupied territories, more than 120,000 of whom worked in Israeli manufacturing, agriculture, construction or services. Many of these lost their jobs.[14]

The same economic crisis also affected Jordan's agricultural sector and the Gulf countries, whose Palestinian workers were a major source of remittance cash for the OPT.[15] These countries, among others, also imposed strict limitations on Palestinian migration for fear that the entire population might simply abandon the territories, which had the effect of increasing the number of youth; under-thirties now made up more than 70 percent of the population. As a result, a whole generation of young Palestinians found themselves under an unprecedented and intolerable level of economic pressure.[16]

All this contributed to continuous growth in the number of schools, universities and technical colleges established to absorb students no longer able to study abroad in other Arab countries.[17] This expanded education sector provided a new public sphere in which Palestinian students from all sorts of social backgrounds came together, quickly setting up student wings of all the various Palestinian factions. On the eve of the First Intifada, there were around 1,000 higher education graduates entering the workforce every year, along with 10,500 students completing secondary school. This situation placed enormous pressure on a limited market that was already weak

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12   Bassam Salhi, *al-Zaʿāma al-Siyāsiyya wa'l-Dīniyya fī'l-Arḍ al-Muḥtalla: Wāqiʿuhā wa-Taṭawwuruhā* 1967-1993 (Jerusalem: Dar al-Quds, 1993), pp. 46-47. Israel's policy towards these areas during the 1970s had two characteristic features: it tried to prevent the formation of a unified Palestinian national elite associated with the PLO, and supported (and created) in its place local traditional elites with the unofficial consent of Jordan. According to Meron Benvenisti, the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) initially retained the old mayors appointed by (and "loyal to") the Jordanian regime and allowed locals a limited margin of freedom to pursue political activity. This policy quickly fell apart, however, when municipal elections given the go-ahead by then Israeli defence minister Shimon Peres resulted in defeat for the pro-Jordanian camp and returned six "hard-liner mayors," more independent and enjoying closer links with the PLO than their predecessors. The occupation authorities then adopted a much more stringent policy, placing a great deal of pressure on the new mayors and even attempting to assassinate one of them. In the period 1978-1982, Israel also attempted to cultivate a parallel rural elite via the so-called "village Leagues" (*rawābiṭ al-qurā*), estimating that some 70 percent of West Bankers were of rural extraction. Village notables were allowed to act as middlemen, helping secure travel and construction permits or family reunification documents from the ICA. But the associations soon failed because of general hostility from the Palestinian population and a Jordanian announcement in March 1982 that it considered membership to be "high treason." Meron Benvenisti, *al-Ḍaffa al-Gharbiyya wa-Qiṭāʿ Ghazza: Bayānāt wa-Ḥaqāʾiq Asāsiyya*, Yassin Jaber (trans.) (Amman: Dar al-Shorouq li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzi', 1987), pp. 144-151. In the Gaza Strip, Israel's basic strategy was to stoke disagreements between Brotherhood activists and the PLO by giving the Islamists a degree of legal support for their social and educational networks at the expense of PLO factions – a strategy which it later became clear, during the First Intifada, had been a serious blunder.

Edgar O'Ballance, *The Palestinian Intifada* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 51.

13   Baumgarten, p. 312

14   Baruch Kimmerling, *The Palestinian People: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 294-295.

15   Ibid.

16   Geoffrey Aronson, *Creating Facts: Israel, Palestinians, and the West Bank* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987).

17   Birzeit University (near Ramallah), Al Najah University (Nablus) and the Islamic University (Gaza), for example, were all founded in the 1970s during the Israeli occupation.

and isolated, to the point that only about 20% percent were able to find employment.[18]

From 1980-1981, the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) also began to extend the heavy taxes it had imposed on East Jerusalem in 1976 to the rest of the population of the occupied territories. This only increased the conviction held by many of the petty bourgeoisie, the inhabitants of the small towns and the merchants that coexisting with the occupation was going to be very difficult, driving them into the arms of organised Palestinian nationalism.[19]

With the rise of the Likud government in the late 1970s, the OPT were increasingly the victim of "de-development" policies rooted in an accelerated strategy of annexation and integration. These policies included intensive use of cheap labour, the immiseration of large portions of the urban and rural population, and efforts to redirect the Palestinian workforce away from local agriculture – the backbone of the economy in the West Bank — and towards poorly paid wage labour.[20] At the same time, the settlement programme sped up noticeably: on the eve of the First Intifada, there were 67,000 settlers in the West Bank, not counting those in the ring of new settlements around East Jerusalem. For the Palestinian population, the establishment of new settlements meant confiscation of land, appropriation of water supplies and other natural resources and the building of new and inconvenient road networks that reflected settlers' interests rather than the needs of Arab haulage or transport.[21] As a result, villagers in particular felt more constricted and threatened by the Zionist settler colonial project than ever.[22]

b. Unprecedented Political Mobilisation and New Political Infrastructure

The package of discriminatory measures taken by Israel against Palestinians in the OPT made Palestinian population far more receptive to political mobilisation and to the rise of what Jamil Hilal called a "cultivated mass mood" distinguished by "a great willingness to pursue the struggle deeply embedded in political attitudes" throughout the area.[23] Many groups that had previously been wary of a confrontation with Israel were convinced to support the campaign of civil disobedience and peaceful protest that culminated in the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of this was the 3,000 percent rise in the number of demonstrations held between 1985 and 1987 – alongside a more than 100 percent rise in the number of armed attacks on Israeli positions between 1983 and 1986.[24] By 1985 it was estimated that some 40 percent of all adults living in the OPT had been detained overnight at least once.[25] In 1988 alone, 1,600 curfews were imposed throughout the occupied territories, with the number of days under curfew exceeding the days that were not.[26] The Iron Fist policy, and the collective punishments imposed by Israel on specific towns and cities whenever popular protest broke out or military operations took place, contributed to a growing sense of general resentment towards the Israeli occupation, providing fertile ground for yet more mobilisation and organisation.[27]

All this took place at a time when the PLO leadership was seeking to compensate for the loss of its Lebanese stronghold in 1982 by cultivating political support in the OPT. Through various informal channels, it began to provide the funding required to build a parallel set

18   Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement,* 1949-1993 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 608.

19   Baumgarten, p. 311. Salim Tamari argues that the social divisions between villagers and urbanites on the one hand and between original inhabitants and more recent arrivals (refugees from other parts of Palestine) on the other were key to the limited role played by urban merchants in the national movement before the First Intifada. See: Salim Tamari, *al-Jabal Ḍidd al-Baḥr: Dirāsāt fī Ishkāliyyāt al-Ḥadātha al-Falisṭīniyya* (Ramallah: Muwatin, 2005), p. 49.

20   On de-development, see: Sara M. Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995).

21   Benvenesti, p. 80.

22   Sayigh, p. 607.

23   Jamil Hilal, "Dalālāt al-Intifāḍa al-Mutajaddida," *al-Fikr al-Dīmuqrāṭī,* no. 1 (1988), p. 8.

24   Sayigh, p. 608.

25   Ibid.

26   Laleh Khalili, "The location of Palestine in global counterinsurgencies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* vol. 42, no. 3 (2010), p. 425.

27   Aronson, pp. 325-326.

of national institutions alongside those put in place by the occupiers. Beneficiaries included unions, chambers of commerce, educational establishments, women's committees, aid committees and student movements.

Just as importantly, these efforts allowed it to create neo-patrimonial mass organisations like Fateh's Youth Movement and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)-linked Action Front. These organisations proved very effective, establishing connections with tens of thousands of young people in Palestinian camps and villages who had never had the opportunity to join clandestine resistance groups but had also been excluded from conventional political activity for "class reasons" or because of other sensitivities arising from social divisions.[28] And the mass arrests of their members, who generally received short to medium-length prison terms, helped transform occupation prisons into a sort of mass training camp in which new cadres could be educated in politics and security procedures.[29]

By 1987, the PLO had managed to construct an extensive network of local semi-official structures across the OPT, recruiting tens of thousands of young activists.[30] Taken together, these structures constituted nothing less than a fully-fledged political infrastructure. But as Baumgarten notes, it was not a unified whole. Instead, it consisted of "a collection of different organisations, each entirely independent from the next. [These organisations] operated for the most part on the basis of a set of semi-contradictory principles. The only thing that united them was that they had no backing other than the émigré [PLO] leadership."[31]

c. The First Intifada: A "Generational" Coup in the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood

Against this complicated backdrop, the Muslim Brotherhood's social and religious activities in the OPT were expanding rapidly, taking advantage of the margin of freedom permitted to it by the Israeli occupation administration. The ICA believed that any expansion in Islamist influence would come at the expense of the PLO. Their intelligence had concluded — wrongly, it turned out — that administrating the OPT via local elites would be less costly than negotiating with the PLO in exile.[32] While using Rabin's "Iron Fist" approach to crush the PLO's networks and dry up their sources of funding, the authorities thus allowed Islamist leaders to fill the political void that these networks left behind. This policy made the 1980s a golden decade for Islamist organisational and missionary activity throughout the various cities and refugee camps of Palestine.

The West Bank of this period boasted dozens of Islamist societies and charitable organisations, but the most significant development was concentrated in the Gaza Strip. Here two major institutions were established that between them exercised a huge influence on public life: the Islamic Centre (founded 1973 and licensed by Israel in 1979), which came to control some 40 percent of mosques in the Strip, and the Islamic University (founded 1978), which was soon producing around five thousand graduates a year.[33] Eyad al-Barghouti shows that the influence of the Islamic Centre in Gaza went far beyond that of the governmental Waqf Administration in the West Bank, with its founder Sheikh Yassin regularly acting as an arbitrator in legal disputes (despite the existence of an official judiciary).[34]

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28   Lisa Taraki, "Mass-Organization in the West Bank," in: N. H. Aruri (ed.), *Occupation: Israel over Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, MA: Association Arab-American University Graduates 1989), p. 32, Cited in: Salim Tamari, "The Palestinian Movement in Transition: Historical Reversals and the Uprising," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1991), p. 64.

29   Sayigh, p. 610.

30   Baumgarten, p. 312.

31   Ibid., p. 317.

32   Zeev Schiff and Ehud Yaari, both Israeli journalists, provide a detailed account of Israeli strategic thinking on the eve of the First Intifada and its failure in: Zeev Schiff & Ehud Yaari, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising--Israel's Third Front* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1990). Israeli newspapers published a series of reports on the failure of Israeli intelligence to understand developments within the Islamist movement in Palestine.

33   Zayed Abu Amr, *al-Ḥaraka al-Islāmiyya fī'l-Ḍaffa al-Gharbiyya wa-Qiṭāʿ Ghazza* (Akka: Dar al-Aswar, 1989), pp. 34-35.

34   Iyad al-Barghouti, *al-Aslama wa'l-Siyāsa fī'l-Arāḍī al-Falisṭīniya al-Muḥtalla* (Jerusalem: Zohraa, 1990), p. 61.

Changes were happening in Palestinian society that Israeli planners had not predicted. They were right that the PLO and the Islamist movement were competitors, but they do not seem to have realised that the Brotherhood community in the OPT was subject to the same historical dynamics as the rest of Palestinian society. On the eve of the First Intifada, dozens of Islamist student activists who had been exposed to the ideas of a new and more radical generation of Brotherhood members during their studies abroad returned to Gaza. They soon became the organisational and financial link between those in "the interior" and their counterparts in the diaspora. And in a context of intense competition between the factions and alarm at the growing influence of Fateh – not to mention the inevitability of an impending clash with the Israeli occupiers – they were able to bring about a sort of quiet generational revolution against the traditional leadership,[35] whose approach of gradual, individual moral reform now seemed completely at odds with the need of the moment. The final leap from missionary work to politics came with the hurried drafting of the Hamas Charter in August 1988.[36]

Bassam al-Salhi has distinguished between two groups within the leadership of the Islamic Centre in Gaza. The first group consisted of its original founding members, including Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and various other traditional Brotherhood leadership figures. The second group, the "day-to-day executive

team who ran the Centre in practice,"[37] was drawn from the younger generation of Brothers, most of them professionals. According to Salhi, the influence of this latter group grew steadily alongside that of a rising generation of preachers, theorists and organisers who came to prominence during the general expansion of Islamist activity during the First Intifada, while Yassin continued to operate as the bridge between the two generations, retaining his symbolic position as the movement's spiritual guide.[38]

At first, then, Hamas was just one antechamber in the Brotherhood's "house of many rooms." But from the end of the First Intifada, politics came to consume the entire Islamist "mission," and a young leadership took charge whose position on Israel was radical even when compared to the émigré leadership of the national movement. This group would remain in place until after the Second Intifada, when a second "generational coup" led to the side-lining of the politicians by the military men.[39]

The years of the First Intifada produced a new political reality in the OPT. The idea of Palestinian national identity developed by the PLO in exile became ubiquitous, and all the various Palestinian forces, nationalist and Islamist, closed ranks around the idea of "resistance," a concept which had come to serve as the most important source of political legitimacy. Old divisions – urban/rural, refugee/local – began to melt away, facilitating the involvement of new

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35   The same thing happened with Islamic Jihad, founded by former Brotherhood member Fathi Shaqaqi with support from the PLO official in charge of the "Western Sector," Khalil al-Wazir. Islamic Jihad's operations won them a great deal of publicity in the occupied territories, particularly an attack on a crack Israeli unit on 15 October 1986 which left 70 soldiers injured. There is a general consensus that the group's activities, which proved very attractive to many young Brotherhood members in Gaza and the West Bank, exacerbated the existing split within the Brotherhood and prompted the founding of Hamas as the organisation's armed wing.

36   Many studies on developments within Hamas have placed far too much emphasis on the 1988 Charter (thrown together by a small number of founding members) because of a preoccupation with analysing discourse at the expense of actual political activity. The Charter foregrounded the relationship with the Brotherhood, expressed a fairly essentialist view of the conflict with "the Jews," ruled out any prospective settlement with Israel and was fiercely critical of the "secular" nature of the other PLO factions. But it was the product of the great pressures of the years leading up to the First Intifada and the urgent need for a document that could be distributed internally in order to mark the movement's establishment. It was never binding, even in Hamas's early years, and did not prevent it from finding common ground with other factions in their shared struggle with Arafat. Nor did it prevent its adoption of a fairly flexible attitude to a settlement with Israel. Khaled Hurub provides a detailed account of the gap between rhetoric and praxis in: Khaled Hurub, *Ḥamās: al-Fikr wa'l-Mumārasa al-Siyāsiyya* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1996). Azzam Tamimi likewise argues that the Charter reflected the views of only a small group of Gazans within Hamas. See: Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2007), pp. 149-150. The Charter was later to be something of an embarrassment to Hamas because of its antisemitic language and ambivalent attitude to minorities. See: Paola Caridi, *Hamas: From Resistance to Government*, Andrea Teti (trans.) (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), p. 197. In 2017 it was superseded by a "statement of principles and general policies."

37   Salhi, pp. 194-195.

38   Ibid.

39   Brenner provides a detailed account of this later development in: Bjorn Brenner, *Gaza Under Hamas: From Islamic Democracy to Islamist Governance* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

demographics in organised political activity.[40] Those considered to have shown a willingness to work with the ICA, including many of the old notables, were dealt with violently and often unjustly; an estimated one in every three Palestinians who died between 1987 and 1993 were killed for "collaborating."[41]

However, the 1987 Intifada also produced other contradictions of a novel and unfamiliar kind, most importantly the newfound division of the political field[42] between two major ideological forces whose understanding of the conflict with Israel was based on very different sets of principles. The first of these forces, led by Fateh, was a diverse and internationally well-connected group made up of respected veterans of the long national struggle. Their approach to the conflict was fundamentally "statist" and nationalist, grounded in the idea of the Palestinians' right to an independent and sovereign state.

The second force, led by Hamas, was just as deeply rooted in Palestinian society but less experienced because of its relatively recent emergence. In line with other contemporary Islamist movements, it understood the conflict in religious terms. According to its Covenant, the land of Palestine is "an Islamic Waqf [Holy Possession] consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day, and no one can renounce it or any part, or abandon it or any part of it."[43] The Covenant also accused the PLO of embracing "the secular state," an idea "entirely contradictory to the religious idea," under the influence of the "intellectual chaos" ushered in by "intellectual invasion […] reinforced by orientalism, [Western] missionaries and colonialism."[44] Much the same sort of language

appeared in the educational material and propaganda it distributed in mosques, schools and universities and in the writings of its preachers and intellectuals.[45]

As the Intifada approached its end, it seemed that the struggle between these two forces would be a defining feature of the new era – a struggle that had already begun to manifest itself in the escalating war of press statements and communiques between Hamas and the PLO's "Unified Command of the Intifada," as well as occasional clashes between the two groups and regular prison brawls.[46] The Oslo Accords of 1993, which brought the PLO leadership out of exile and set them up as leaders of the new Palestinian Authority, only put an end to this, though, temporarily.

Approaching Hamas's rise through the lens of ideology is critical. However, overemphasising the ideological dimension inevitably produces oversimplification. Similar to many ideological organisations that have been subjected to a process of deradicalisation and nationalisation, Hamas went through a process of "Islamisation" and "Palestinianisation" since its foundation, making it, more than thirty years after its founding, very different organisation than it was early on.[47]

Overreliance on the ideological approach lends too much importance to texts and discourse at the expense of social agency and collective social action. It also places the spotlight firmly on the regional and international macro-level developments, downplaying local developments and, in some cases, treating them as simply the inevitable extension of developments in the international sphere (and thus dismissing the crucial importance of negotiation between the two

40   Tamari.

41   Kimmerling, *The Palestinian People*, p. 304. Anywhere between 15 percent and 45 percent of those killed as collaborators were targeted for "moral" misdeeds and not for any specific political reason: suspected prostitutes, drug dealers or homosexuals were assassinated, and on some occasions family or personal disputes were the reason. In the camps, special paramilitary groups were set up to deal with "agents" and "collaborators," including the "Black Lynx" group associated with Fateh and its Hamas counterpart, Majd. See: Saleh Abdel Jawad & Yizhar Be'er, *Collaborators in the Occupied Territories: Human Rights abuses and Violations* (Jerusalem: B'tselem, 1994).

42   Jamil Hilal argues that Hamas succeeded in penetrating and establishing its own position in the political field, but that this happened at a time when the field was already collapsing, and that its success accelerated that process. See: Jamil Hilal, "Tafakkuk al-Ḥaql al-Siyāsī al-Falisṭīnī," *al-Dirāsāt al-Falisṭīniyya*, vol. 27, no. 107 (Summer 2016), pp. 7-13.

43   **"**Hamas Charter, Article 18," *Al Jazeera Net*, 16/07/2005, accessed on 05/10/2020 at: https://bit.ly/30vqAHm

44   Ibid, Article 27.

45   See, for example, Ibrahim al-Maqadmeh's *Maʿālim fī'l-Ṭarīq ilā Taḥrīr Filasṭīn* ("Milestones on the Road to the Liberation of Palestine"), whose title was clearly influenced by that of Sayyid Qutb's *Maʿālim fī'l-Ṭarīq* ("Milestones"). I would like to thank Ahmad Hussein for making me aware of this book.

46   Menachem Klein, "Competing Brothers: The Web of Hamas-PLO Relations," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1996), pp. 111-132.

47   Tareq Baconi traces developments within Hamas's ideology and politics from its inception through to its entrenchment in the Gaza Strip in: Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

levels). As Salwa Ismail has noted, when we place too much emphasis on major structural changes, we sometimes occlude the far-reaching effects of micro-level struggles between local groups.[48]

2. Hamas as a Social Movement Organisation

The second key approach to Hamas, then, is to study it as a Social Movement Organisation (SMO) struggling to protect its position in the institutionalised narrative of Palestinian history. One of the many possible definitions of a social movement is that it is a long-term collection of organised or semi-organised collective actions led by those who have historically been marginalised within the symbolic history of society, with the intention of influencing and becoming part of its cultural orientations.[49] The SMO, meanwhile, is the institutional or organisational structure that takes shape with the stated purpose of representing a social movement and achieving its historical aims.[50] There are many aspects of overlap between the SMO approach and the ideological approach, most importantly the cultural aspect. But it places more emphasis on the meso level,[51] and stresses the competition for control over the cultural field that Alain Touraine calls the historicity of society.[52]

In the past two decades, academics have used social movement theory to understand collective action by Islamist movements – despite objections that religious movements "do not present serious challenges to the prevailing social order"[53] – by "focus[ing] on everyday interactions and processes to understand how they shape Islamists' worldviews and identities"[54] and giving more weight to action and its meanings than to ideology and texts.[55] As will be discussed in this section, employing this approach with Hamas helps to understand the complexity of collective action and its challenge to symbolic hegemony. However, it also raises some methodological problems.

a. Armed Struggle, the Fedayeen and the Rise of the Contemporary Palestinian National Narrative

Today's Palestinian national narrative emerged during the rise of pan-Arabism and shows a clear pan-Arab influence. The heroic battles of the PLO helped to consolidate an identity built around struggle, an identity that tried to make up for the misery, injustice and atomisation suffered by Palestinians in refugee camps – as well as the cynical policies of Arab regimes keen to exploit the symbolic capital of the Palestinian struggle but quite happy to let their camps develop into vast poverty belts around the major cities.[56] The PLO's last and greatest success was to achieve institutional recognition for the Palestinian people as a unit and for its own role as representatives

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48   Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), p. 14.

49   This definition is based on Alain Touraine's "action theory" approach, influenced by Weber. See: Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). This overlaps closely with Manuel Castells' theory of urban social movements, for which see: Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1983).

50   Social movement studies tend to approach the life cycle of a movement as part of the political process, from crisis to institutionalisation as an SMO, and then seek to understand why it is that the movement succeeded or failed. The success of a social movement generally depends on the opportunity structure and its ability to create structures capable of mobilising its financial and symbolic capital. See: Nancy Whittier, "Political Generations, Micro-Cohorts, and the Transformation of Social Movements," *American sociological review*, vol. 62, no. 5 (October 1997), pp. 760-778. One key criticism of social movement studies accuses it of dismissing the importance of collective identity – a question I will come to shortly – but more recent studies have overcome this problem.

51   Thus attempting to overcome the structure-agency dichotomy in analysing collective action, a dichotomy given expression by the contradiction between structuralist approaches and rational choice theory.

52   Touraine defines the historical narrative of a given society as social actions that seek to change the hegemonic cultural orientations. See: Alain Touraine, *The Self-Production of Society*, D. Coltman (trans.) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977), p. 65.

53   See: Khalil al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 29.

54   Ibid, p. 26.

55   Ibid.

56   Rosemary Sayigh, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), chapter 3; Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. xxxii.

of that people throughout the world, which it achieved at the beginning of the 1970s.[57]

Like any other political identity, Palestinian identity required an "other" to define itself against.[58] Palestinians in the diaspora had two "others": Zionism, which had expelled them from their land; and the Arabs, who had failed to keep their promise to liberate Palestine. This had a significant effect on the development of the Palestinian national narrative and its political discourse, which downplayed the religious aspect as much as possible – both in reaction to the ethnoreligious state idea maintained by the Zionists and to check any movement towards naturalisation and assimilation into the broader Arab environment.[59] In its place, it foregrounded the idea of the return to the lost national homeland, the imagined ethnic dimension and the memory of the "lost village" with the aim of politicising the fellahin (peasants, villagers) scattered across the refugee camps.[60]

This approach was visible in the practices of the various PLO factions, who revived Palestinian folk tradition in the diaspora camps, emphasised the close link between the fellahin and the land,[61] and tied the armed struggle symbolically to the fellahin,[62] drawing on a long history of agrarian revolts against the British mandatory authorities and Zionist settlement; the fellahin were thus transformed into *fedayeen* – freedom fighters.[63] As Azmi Bishara puts it, their agricultural calendar and cycle of popular festivals was "replaced by seasonal conferences calling for a "return" and transistor radios promising them liberation," while their villages were reduced to "a nostalgic longing, then to a political homeland which formed the basis for new political movements, for guerrilla action and for the crystallisation of modern Palestinian identity."[64]

It was against this backdrop that camp militias first emerged as the last great hope of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees – particularly after the Nasserist defeat and the collapse of pan-Arabism. But the role of the PLO factions was not limited to mobilisation and political organisation. The uprooting of the old social system, with its bonds of solidarity rooted in primordial attachments, had given rise to a sense of atomisation and social degradation. The nascent factional organisations thus found themselves creating new bonds of solidarity emphasising brotherhood, comradeship and sacrifice and a single aim and trajectory.

One of the ways this manifested was the tendency for leadership figures in the new factions to be depicted as father figures, complete with paternal *noms de guerre*: Abu Mazen ("Father of Mazen"), Abu Ammar ("Father of Ammar"), Abu Iyad ("Father of Iyad"). Some of them acquired distinctly patriarchal nicknames, too: Yasser Arafat was known as "the old man" (*al-khityār*), while George Habash, leader of the PFLP, was called "the sage" (*al-ḥakīm*).[65] And their behaviour matched their names. The leaders of the

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57   Azmi Bishara, *Ṣafqat Trāmb-Nitanyāhū: al-Ṭarīq ilā'l-Naṣṣ wa-minhu ilā'l-Ijāba ʿan Suʾāl: Mā al-ʿAmal?* (Doha andBeirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 82-83.

58   On "otherness," see: A. D. Smith, "Ethnosymbolism," in: John Stone et al. (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism* (Hoboken, N J: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

59   As' ad Ghanem, "Palestinian Nationalism: An Overview," *Israel Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2013), p. 21.

60   Rochelle Davis, "Mapping the Past, Re-Creating the Homeland: Memories of Village Places in Pre-1948 Palestine," in: Ahmad H. Sa'di & Lila Abu-Lughod (eds.), *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 53-75.

61   Rosemary Sayigh, "Sources of Palestinian Nationalism: A Study of a Palestinian Camp in Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1977), p. 19.

62   This despite the fact that PLO cadres were overwhelmingly of urban origin. See: Kimmerling, *The Palestinian People,* p. 243.

63   Azmi Bishara, *An Takūna ʿArabiyyan fī Ayyāminā* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2009), p. 140; Kimmerling, *The Palestinian People,* p. 243.

The Israeli Orientalist Gabriel Baer (1919-1982) has argued that of the great wave of rural rebellions that swept the Middle East during this period, the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 and the Druze revolts in Lebanon were the only ones to take a clearly organised form and make common cause with the urban elites. See: Gabriel Baer, *Fellah and Townsman in the Middle East: Studies in Social History* (Oxan and New York: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1982), pp. 284-285.

Baruch Kimmerling (1939-2007) traces contemporary Palestinian identity back to the revolt of Palestinian peasants against Egyptian occupation in 1940. See: Baruch Kimmerling, "The Formation of Palestinian Collective Identities: The Ottoman and Mandatory Periods," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2000), pp. 48-81.

64   Bishara, *An Takūna ʿArabiyyan*, p. 140.

65   For more on the influence of injured manhood on the discourse of the national movement, see: Joseph Massad, "Conceiving the Masculine: Gender and Palestinian Nationalism," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3 (July 1995), pp. 467-483.

On the fundamental relationship between different conceptions of masculinity in national movements generally, see: Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1998), p. 245.

factions all took great pains to present themselves as generous fathers full of pride and affection for their children, indulgent of their mistakes but sometimes forced to punish them for their own good.[66] They monopolised control of financial resources, each building their own network of clients and powerbases in order to maintain the balance of power and undermine competitors. This feature, characteristic of the PLO's political administration and its various factions alike, was transplanted directly into the Palestinian Authority after the signing of the Oslo Accords.[67] The contradictions to which it gave rise have had an ongoing influence on Palestinian politics still visible today.

b. An "Islamist" Revisit into the Palestinian Historical Narrative

These discursive practices were understandable, perhaps even crucial, in the complicated and disparate context of the Palestinian diaspora. But the historical narrative to which they gave rise did not reflect the experiences of a considerable number of those living in the OPT whether in cities or in camps, who were in direct contact with Zionism and had not had such intense experiences of the dual "other" (Zionism and the Arab regimes). For them, it made far more sense to define their struggle in religious terms. The *fedai* ethos cultivated by the PLO thus did not entirely match the jihadi ethos of the Islamists, who found the PLO's language, with its many "ifs" and "maybes," frustrating and demoralising.

By the end of the 1980s – as better education, greater marginalisation and massive PLO investment was producing unprecedented politicisation of Palestinians in the OPT – it seemed that Palestinian political history there was being rewritten as the history of the PLO, and that any alternative struggle was now to be annexed to the PLO's struggle, reinforcing the symbolism of its official narrative.

The Islamists were not the only ones denied recognition. The Communists, too, had long been involved in political organising and clandestine resistance in the OPT.[68] But the Islamists were the only ones who had social resources to resist the PLO's symbolic hegemony within the Palestinian political field.[69] From the beginning of the 1980s, whether consciously or unconsciously, they began to articulate a new, two-pronged vision of the struggle. On the one hand, this new vision represented an authentic, Islamically coloured movement of resistance against Israeli occupation. On the other, it embodied a desire to recast the Palestinian narrative in such a way that this movement would have a place within it.

By the beginning of the First Intifada, the Islamists of the OPT – now in control of a vast network of charitable organisations and committees in the Gaza Strip[70] – had developed their own conceptual framework that went far beyond the well-worn glossary of the exiled national movement. With a much more educated population, it was far easier than before to make connections between the modern struggle and the long history of jihad and foreign invasion in Palestine dating back to the Crusades, or to emphasise the religious aspects of Palestinian resistance prior to 1948 and thereby appropriate it ideologically. Ironically enough, this was the same history that the PLO's historians and researchers had helped people to rediscover and document.[71]

Hamas can thus be understood not only as a movement of resistance to the Zionist settler-colonial project but also for its right to participate in putting together a

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66 For comments from Mamdouh Nofal (Yasser Arafat's military adviser) on this point, see: Mamdouh Nofal, "Yasir Arafat, The Political Player: A Mixed Legacy," *JPS*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2006), pp. 23-37.

67 Jamil Hilal, "Abʿād Maziq al-Mashrūʿ al-Falisṭīnī Baʿd Oslō," *al-Dirāsāt al-Falisṭīniyya*, vol. 9, no. 36 (Autumn 1998), pp. 17-29; Ali al-Jarbawi & Wendy Pearlman, "Maziq Fatḥ baʿd Ghiyāb al-Kārizmā wa'l-Sharʿiyya al-Thawriyya," *Dirāsāt Falisṭīniyya*, vol. 18, no. 71 (Summer 2007), pp. 37-50.

68 The Communists in particular were key to the establishment of the "National Front" or "National Guidance Committee," which I will discuss later. See: Salhi, pp. 49-57.

69 On hegemony, see: Thomas R. Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, no. 2 (April/ June 1975), p. 353. On Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital, see: Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital. (1986)," in: Imre Szeman & Timothy Kaposy (eds.), *Cultural Theory: An Anthology* (Hoboken, N J: Wiley-Blackwell 2011), pp. 81-93.

70 On Hamas's social networks, see: Sara Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

71 Khalidi, pp. 195-196

historical narrative of society, allowing it to stake its claim to a share of the PLO's symbolic resources.[72] This approach tends to view the movement's political use of Islam as a matter of "cultural framing"[73] and of resource mobilisation. It focuses on the meaning produced by collective action and the role of social networks in challenging symbolic hegemony.[74]

The behaviour of the groups that made up the movement before and during the First Intifada reflected this new dispensation. It is clearly visible in the language used in their educational establishments, propaganda materials and graffiti[75] and the names they chose to replace the existing nomenclature of public space (streets, neighbourhoods, mosques).[76] But it is perhaps even clearer from the (ever-changing) names chosen for the organisation's military wing – the "Palestinian Mujahideen" established by Ahmed Yassin in 1983-1984; the "Abdullah Azzam Brigades", named after perhaps the most famous Palestinian to have fought the USSR in Afghanistan. The choice that they finally settled on in 1991, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades,[77] has a double symbolism: Qassam is both a shared symbol of the Arab Revolt of 1936 celebrated by all parts of the Palestinian national movement equally[78] and, at the same time,

an Imam and preacher. He thus represents a desire to capture both worlds: the Palestinian and the Islamic.

Within two decades of its emergence, Hamas had indeed succeeded at capturing both. It possesses a sophisticated military organisation – despite its failure in the West Bank – and has transformed the Gaza Strip into a stronghold of resistance despite the enemies that surround it on all sides.[79] At the same time, it has produced its own narrative which has had a remarkable influence on the Palestinian political lexicon, which has been steadily Islamised. Today even the leftist factions of the PLO use a rhetoric coloured by that of Hamas – and the PA's political and legislative initiatives likewise reflect this steady Islamisation.[80]

For example, Khaled Hurub notes a clear Islamist influence in the various articles of the theoretical and constitutional documents that are supposed to command consensus among Palestinians. The PA's Basic Law, promulgated in 2002, reflects an approach to religion not at all in keeping with the principles set out in the Palestinian National Charter signed in 1968. The draft Palestinian Constitution tabled at the Legislative Assembly in the early 2000s shows the same tendency. All this leads Hurub to conclude that the national discourse has "abandoned its secular

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72   Examples of scholarship that has approached Hamas as a social movement include (but are not limited to): Glenn E. Robinson, "Hamas as Social Movement," in: Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 112-139; Shaul Mishal, "The Pragmatic Dimension of the Palestinian Hamas: A Network Perspective," *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2003), pp. 569-589; Bader Araj & Robert J. Brym, "Opportunity, Culture and Agency: Influences on Fatah and Hamas Strategic Action During the Second Intifada," *International Sociology*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2010), pp. 842-868; Emin Poljarevic, "HAMAS: Resistance and Mobilization Through Islam," *Social Movement Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2013), pp. 477-482; Rafael Reuveny, "Palestinian Islamism and Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, vol. 22 (2000), pp. 219-245.

73   For the concept of "framing," see: Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 21.

74   John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 6 (1977), pp. 1212-1241.

75   Saleh Abdeljawad, "Faṣāʾil al-Ḥaraka al-Waṭaniyya al-Falisṭīniyya fī'l-Arāḍī al-Muḥtalla wa-Shiʿārāt al-Judrān," *Dirāsāt Falisṭīniyya*, vol. 2, no. 7 (Summer 1991), pp. 87-104; Julie Peteet, "The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1996), pp. 139-159.

76   On the efforts of the Islamist organisations to Islamise public space in the Middle East, see: M. Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris., 2002), chapter 8. Salwa Ismail, among others, has noted this phenomenon elsewhere. See: Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minnesota, MI: Minnesota University Press, 2006), p. xxxviii.

77   The final decision on the name came after a long internal debate over whether to choose Azzam or Qassam. Fighters in the West Bank preferred the former, but the latter was already in wide use in Gaza. See: Bilal Shalash, "Taḥawwulāt al-Muqāwama al-Musalaḥa li-Ḥarakat Ḥamās fī'l-Ḍaffa al-Gharabiyya fī Athnāʾ Intifāḍat al-Aqṣā min al-Markaziyya ilā'l-Shaẓāyā al-Mutafajjira," in: *Qaḍiyyat Falisṭīn wa-Mustaqbal al-Mashrūʿ al-Waṭanī al-Falisṭīnī*, vol 1: *Fī'l-Huwwiyya wa'l-Muqāwama wa'l-Qānūn al-Duwalī* (Beirut and Doha: ACRPS, 2015), p. 425, footnote 14.

78   This despite the fact that Qassam was originally from Jableh in Syria. According to Sayegh's autobiography, Arafat was shocked that the authors of the *Palestinian Encyclopedia* gave over several pages to a Syrian while largely ignoring "the more important Palestinian mujahid Abdelqader al-Husseini" (who led the Battle of Qastal in 1948). See: Anis Sayegh, *Anīs Ṣāyigh ʿan Anīs Ṣāyigh* (Beirut: al-Rayyes, 2006), p. 318.

79   On Hamas's failure in the West Bank, see: Shalash, ibid.

80   Similar developments can be seen in other Arab countries whose regimes have tried to defang Islamist parties by adopting their rhetoric and legal practices. See for example: Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (California: California University Press, 1998).

premises" in order to compete with the Islamists on their own discursive ground.[81]

Hamas's success, however, has come at the expense of the so-called "Palestinian question" that has split Palestine in two – a question which in one sense revolves around a struggle of narratives of a kind never experienced by Palestinians before. The accelerating Islamisation of Palestinian society has also had deleterious effects on the Palestinian struggle as a national liberation movement and has lost the Palestinian issue many former international allies who saw it in these terms.

Despite the great insights that the social movement approach can give us when applied to Hamas, if too much emphasis is given to this dimension of the movement it can result in an exaggerated view of social actors' agency and of the rationality of collective social action – at the expense of broader developments concerning collective identity.[82] It can also lead to the exclusion of the unintended consequences of

collective action within institutionalised contexts.[83] In fact, scholars have criticised Social Movement Theory (SMT) for "giv[ing] primacy to 'process' over 'structure' in creating collective action"[84] and for its inability to explain why Islamists are "able to take advantage of political opportunity structures while other groups cannot."[85] Therefore, SMT is analytically valuable only insofar as it can be incorporated into other analytical frameworks: sociology of religion, social psychology and comparative politics.[86]

This criticism can also be applied to the case of Hamas. SMT cannot explain Hamas's creation of mobilisation structures or its ability to take advantage of political opportunities despite the vast symbolic and material resources available to its competitors on the left. More importantly, a single-minded emphasis on this approach in the Palestinian context risks downplaying the significance of the settler-colonial context and exaggerating the independence of the Palestinian political field.

3. Hyper-nationalism: Hamas as Heir to the Palestinian National Movement

The third approach, like the first two, emphasises the tension between two key pillars of Palestinian identity: the national and the Islamic. Unlike the first two approaches, however, it is distinguished by its focus on the profound transformations that have taken place within ideas of representation and of the legitimacy of the Palestinian political establishment, transformations which have mirrored equally radical changes in the state-society relationship elsewhere in the Arab World of the last three decades. From this perspective Hamas is an expression of so-called "hyper-nationalism" or "neo-nationalism"[87] driven

by a dramatic recentring of Palestinian identity around its Islamic aspects, a process which extends far beyond the movement and into every corner of Palestinian nationalism. In this sense, Hamas is the Palestinian counterpart of the various "communal structures" that have taken over parts of the delegitimised state all over the Arab World, the next stage in the life cycle of the Palestinian national movement and its legitimate heir. The great value of this approach is its emphasis on the development of the "imagined community" and its political imagination. But excessive focus on this dimension, as we will see, can produce an

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81   Khaled Hurub, *al-Tayyār al-Islāmī wa'l-ʿAlmana al-Siyāsiyya: al-Tajriba al-Turkiyya wa-Tajārib al-Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiyya al-ʿArabiyya* (Bir Zeit: University of Bir Zeit, 2008), pp. 44-45.

82   This seems to be a general tendency among students of social movements. Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, for example, criticise many such studies for "turn[ing] identity into a kind of residual category, describing what happens outside structures, outside the state, outside rational action." See: Francesca Polletta & James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology,* vol. 27 (2001), p. 285.

83   Kei Yoshida, "Defending Scientific Study of the Social: Against Clifford Geertz (and his Critics)," *Philosophy of the social sciences*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2007), p. 310.

84   Al-Anani, p. 26.

85   Ibid, p. 27.

86   Ibid, p. 29.

87   Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Nationalism and the Arabs," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 1/2 (Spring 1995), pp. 1-17.

approach influenced by a linear view of history that denies local forces any political agency.

a. Statolatry in Contemporary Palestinian Political Discourse

The Palestinian obsession with statehood began to develop shortly after the foundation of the PLO, which was a product of the optimistic and ambitious pan-Arabism era Arab establishment. More than a few scholars have noted the remarkable structural and discursive similarity between the structure of the PLO – with its bloated bureaucracy and sprawling networks – and that of contemporary Arab regimes, despite its expulsion from the territory over which it claimed sovereignty. This created an organisation that was full of bombastic rhetoric but conservative in its actual political practice. Since then, as Bishara puts it, Palestinian nationalists have turned the state into a graven idol belonging more to the realm of language than reality, an ideology whose constant invocation in rhetoric serves as a fig leaf for difficult facts.[88]

It must be noted, of course, that the national movement did not *choose* to pursue statehood. This approach was imposed on it by a strategic consensus between the Arab regimes of the 1960s. By facilitating the PLO's formation in 1964, these regimes hoped to rid themselves of the responsibility of finding a solution in Palestine. They quickly found willing allies among the armed organisations, particularly Fateh, whose star was in the ascendant after the Battle of Karameh (1968). A string of unrealistic populist slogans told Palestinians that they had to take their future into their own hands, that it was their responsibility to free Palestine by armed struggle, that it would be their liberation of Palestine that paved the way to Arab unity (and not the other way around as was generally accepted at the time).[89] Like Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*,[90] nobody was going to help Palestinians escape from the metaphorical cistern in which they were trapped. They had to break out themselves.

The purpose of the armed struggle was never to form the basis of an effective strategy. Rather it served other primary functions, most importantly: elite formation, political legitimation, nation building and consolidating the Palestinian political "entity." Violence allowed a unique "massing effect" in a segmented society and "the heroic imagery and language of armed struggle gave new substance to the imagined community of the Palestinians" who were portrayed as a "revolutionary people waging an active struggle to determine their fate, rather than as a mass of helpless refugees passively awaiting charity handouts."[91] The exiled leadership's aim was simply to politically mobilise Palestinian communities everywhere and establish themselves as their sole legitimate representative. They would then be able to demand statehood on their behalf – the natural endpoint of the whole process. This goal was gradually accepted by all the Palestinian factions, beginning with the call to establish a national government in any liberated part of Palestine enshrined in the "Ten Points" (1974) and culminating in the declaration of Palestinian independence published in Algeria on 15 November 1988. The PLO fought a series of bitter conflicts with "too many enemies,"[92] losing tens of thousands of lives in the process, in order to defend this vision. From then on, as Ahmad Jalil al-Azm puts it, "the state was the independent variable and the national movement the dependent variable."[93]

Palestinian national discourse in this period could not help but be populist at a time when national

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88   Bishara, *Ṣafqat Trāmb-Nitanyāhū,* p. 109.

89   On the historical context of the "Palestine First" doctrine and debates with Arab nationalists, see: Sayigh, pp. 153-162. These ideas were deeply controversial among Palestinian and Arab intellectuals from the outset. For an example of criticism, see: Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, *Dirāsa Naqdiyya li-Fikr al-Muqāwama* al-Falisṭīniyya (Beirut: Dar al-Awda, 1973). For a critical reading of Fateh documents from that period, see: Majed Kilani, *Niqāsh al-Silāḥ: Qirāʾa fī Ishkāliyyāt al-Tajriba al-ʿAskariyya al-Falisṭīniyya* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Studies and Publication, 2020), Chapter 2.

90   Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1978 [1972]).

91   Sayigh, pp. 667- 668.

92   Rosemary Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1994).

93   Ahmad Jamil al-Azm, "al-Mashrūʿ al-Waṭanī al-Falisṭīnī bayn al-Waṭan wa'l-Dawla," in: *Qaḍiyyat Falisṭīn wa-Mustaqbal al-Mashrūʿ al-Waṭanī al-Falisṭīnī,* p. 90.

liberation movements worldwide were populist.[94] Had the Palestinian factions not lent an exaggerated importance to the free and independent action of Palestinians themselves, the centrality of Palestine, the unity of the Palestinian people and its right to self-determination, then it would have been possible to imagine other ways of "solving" the issue – seeking full citizenship and integration in neighbouring Arab countries, for example, and accepting the status quo. Instead, the PLO managed to create a Palestinian identity that precluded the absorption of Palestinians into their host societies. But it failed to secure its ultimate aim of full statehood. This is the basic problem at the heart of the Palestine issue today.[95]

b. The Spread of the Idea of the "State" in the Occupied Territories and the Conflict for Representation

The state project was the product of the complicated context facing the diaspora national movement. It was, as yet, of little interest to the inhabitants of the OPT, whose weak and fragmented political elites continued throughout the 1970s to pin their hopes in what seemed to be more realistic prospects. In the West Bank, the traditional notability fixated on the "Jordanian Option," which they imagined would allow them to claw back the position they had enjoyed as "minor partners" in government under Jordanian rule.[96] This Option was also popular, albeit for different reasons, among Palestinian-Jordanian communists.[97] The more politically active urban elite – still reeling from the shock of the defeat in 1967 – continued to hold out for a change in the official Arab position,

despite Egypt's ever more decisive turn towards extricating itself from the conflict at all costs (a process which culminated in the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978).[98] Some rural and urban political elites simply found a way to coexist with the new dispensation, a decision given institutional expression by the Israeli-sponsored Village Leagues and commercial networks set up during these years.[99] And the Brotherhood leadership and the Islamists more broadly, particularly those of Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, were given to messianic interpretations of the occupation, arguing that scripture clearly showed Israel was soon to be destroyed by divine intervention and a new Caliphate established.[100]

The essential problem was that despite serious efforts in this direction, [101] the OPT lacked a substantial political society and a coherent political elite with a strong sense of Palestinian national identity, all of which had developed much earlier in the camps of the diaspora. For this to change it would take a new generation, a generation to whom Palestinian identity was more meaningful and who were more open to political organising. That generation only arrived in the complex socioeconomic and international context of the 1980s, which gave rise to a broad conviction that it would not be possible to come to an accommodation with the occupation.

One of the most important consequences of this development was the new popularity enjoyed by the notion of Palestinian statehood, at a time when the idea of "self-rule" was generating a lot of interest internationally and alternatives seemed to be thin

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94   Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Rogers Brubaker, "Populism and Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2020), pp. 44-66. On the importance of "stories" in national liberation movements, see: Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

95   Rashid Khalidi argues that the story of Palestinian identity is simultaneously one of success and failure: the success of Palestinian identity in establishing itself, and the failure of Palestinians to govern themselves. See: Khalidi, pp. 208-209.

96   Jamil Hilal, "al-Intifāḍa wa'l-Taghyīr al-Maṭlūb," *al-Fikr al-Dimuqrāṭī*, no. 2 (1988), p. 6.

97   Represented at the time by the Jordanian Communist Party. A Palestinianised splinter party, the People's Party, was founded in 1982 and later joined the PLO.

98   Aronson, p. 190.

99   See: Footnote 12.

100   Sheikh Yassin still maintains that the Qur'an shows Israel will be destroyed in 2027. See: "Ḥarakat Ḥamās Kamā Yarāhā al-Shaykh Aḥmad Yāsīn," episode 8 of *Shāhid ʿalāʾl-ʿAṣr*, Al Jazeera, 5/6/1999, accessed on 5/10/2020.

101   I refer here to the National Front, which attracted a broad swathe of leftist figures during the 1970s. Both Jordan – which still hoped to restore control over the West Bank – and Israel were deeply opposed to the emergence of any independent Palestinian elite. The PLO, meanwhile, was simply hostile to any alternative that might seek leadership to the occupied territories. A great deal of pressure was placed on the National Front's members, some of whom were deported, and the organisation itself was proscribed by Israel in 1984. See: Kimmerling, *The Palestinian People: A History*, pp. 278-281.

on the ground.[102] The First Intifada heralded the final victory in the OPT of the vision of Palestinian nationality that the PLO had been advocating for so many years in the diaspora. This victory saved the PLO itself from its slow death in Tunisia and brought the centre of gravity of the national movement triumphantly back to Palestine itself. But it also breathed new life into the smouldering conflict over representation between the interior and the diaspora – a conflict in which the PLO had until recently appeared to be the victor.

By the 1990s the PLO was in serious trouble. It had lost its stronghold in Lebanon in 1982, and in 1991 its members (along with many other Palestinians) had been expelled from Kuwait *en masse*. Its sources of funding were quickly drying up, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was ushering in a new international order in which the USA was king. Its leaders saw clearly that they were facing the Palestinian iteration of the so-called "Arab question":[103] its brittle institutions, which enjoyed very little legitimacy, were very vulnerable to attack from below, and risked losing their hard-won position as exclusive representatives of the Palestinian people to grassroots forces from the occupied territories willing to adopt a more radical rhetoric. Arafat, always the canny politician, recognised this problem at a very early stage, and elected to pip Hamas to the post by signing the Oslo Accords.[104] He had stared into the abyss – but he did not realise that the abyss was staring back.

Baumgarten argues that Hamas comprises the third "phase" of the Palestinian national movement after the pan-Arabists (1952 onwards) and Fateh (1965 onwards), with each stage lasting around two decades and each new movement fed by the failure of its predecessor.[105] Kimmerling, on the other hand, maintains that Hamas's meteoric rise would not have been possible outside the "clash of identities" between Palestinian and Israeli society engendered by the long Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. On this reading, the Islamisation of Palestinian identity is the logical counterpart of the emphasis placed by the political culture of the Israeli elite on Jewish identity[106], as well as the product of the struggle between the westernising-modernist vision of the nationalist old guard and the fundamentalist-modernist vision of the "new guard" brought to prominence by the Intifada.[107]

This interpretation emphasises the importance of identitarian expressions in the "Palestinian community" alongside similar identitarian transformations within the "Jewish community." It sees in the political advent of the Islamists the direct counterpart of the rise of Likud in the Israel of the 1970s.[108] Hamas, in this view, is not an equivalent to Fateh but the next stage in its evolution – just as the Israeli right is the next stage in the evolution of Zionism, originally a secular project.

It is important to note that this approach – taken alone – can lead to misunderstandings. It can foster a linear view of history difficult to reconcile with the vibrancy of diverse and complex societies. It can also produce an exaggerated view of the importance of collective social action at the expense of the colonial context while also depriving Palestinians of their agency by

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102 The Camp David Accords provided, in somewhat vague terms, for Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza, as have various subsequent initiatives spearheaded by the USA and other international forces. Circumstances conspired to prevent any practical implementation of these provisions on the ground – the most important by far being Israeli intransigence – until they were given new life by the First Intifada. On discussions of self-rule, see: Bishara, *Ṣafqat Trāmb-Nitanyāhū*, pp. 17-29.

103 On the "Arab Question," see: Azmi Bishara, *al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dimuqrāṭī ʿArabī* (Doha and Beirut: ACRPS, 2014).

104 Bishara, *Ṣafqat Trāmb-Nitanyāhū*, p. 86.

105 H. Baumgarten, "The Three Faces/ Phases of Palestinian Nationalism, 1948-2005," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2005), pp. 25-48.

106 Baruch Kimmerling, *Clash of Identities: Explorations in Israeli and Palestinian Societies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 300-301.

107 Ibid., p. 300.

108 Azmi Bishara summarises the cultural shift within the Israeli elite after June 1967 as follows: "The sovereign 'Jewish state' had been the main constitutive element of the 'Jewish Nation.' Now Jewish identity in the form produced by the action of the state became the main constitutive element of the state. That was in elite political culture. In popular culture, meanwhile, democratisation and privatisation bolstered the influence of a particular mass culture – one eastern Jews had preserved during the long years of official suppression in the name of a secular, European melting pot. Rights in the Jewish state were predicated on Jewishness, and those who felt that their rights were not being respected strategically emphasised their Jewishness in order to further those rights. For Jewish citizens of Arab origin, that meant doubling down on their Jewish identity and, often, expressing their hatred or contempt for Arabs." See: Azmi Bishara, *Min Yahūdiyyat al-Dawla Ḥatta Shārōn: Dirāsa fī Tanāquḍ al-Dimuqrāṭiyya al-Isrāʾīliyya* (Cairo: Shorouk, 2005), p. 168.

implying that Palestinian identity is simply the mirror image of Zionist identity.

Equally, however, it does provide us with an excellent insight into the failure of all attempts at agreement between the PLO and Hamas on the eve of the First Intifada. Hamas demanded a string of impossible concessions as a precondition of it joining the National Assembly,[109] and during the first Intifada consistently tried to distinguish itself from the Unified Command, issuing a steady stream of press statements and communiques in its own name. It even published its own distinct charter, in a clear repudiation of the 1968 National Charter. Arafat thus realised at a very early juncture that it saw itself not as a potential partner but an alternative to the PLO. In fact, Hamas rarely pretended otherwise. In one press conference in 1989, Yassin made it clear that his movement recognised the PLO as the legitimate representative of Palestinians *abroad* and not in the OPT.[110] He was subsequently to add at another press conference that "we have no disagreement with the PLO. We think one way and they think another. The only true judge is the people – and whatever the people decide, we accept."[111]

Oslo thus represented, at least in part, a brief intersection of the interests of the PLO and Israel, both of whom sought to check the rise of Hamas. Of course, Hamas's own actions in the 1990s – boycotting the new PA institutions, undermining their functioning through regular bombings, and proudly throwing its full weight behind the Second Intifada (2000-2005) – themselves represented a different kind of intersection of interests with Israel. As Yassin put it in one interview: "They wanted to drag us to accept compromise [with Israel]. Instead, we dragged them to join the resistance."[112]

But Hamas's desire to be an alternative to the PLO, regardless of how realistic it was, did not mean that it came up with any alternative to the Palestinian state project in the OPT – the same project proposed under the Oslo Accords. In fact, the movement implicitly internalised (albeit in Islamised form) the PLO's obsession with statehood and the discourse surrounding it. After thirty long years of daring and bloody struggle, Hamas succeeded in obtaining its own modified version of statehood, at least in the Gaza Strip. But like its counterpart in Ramallah, it has quickly discovered that it is a "statehood" without a state.

Conclusion

This study has considered three different but overlapping approaches that have been taken by scholars in order to understand Hamas and its political and social behaviour. The first approach takes Hamas as an Islamist movement, emphasising the regional and international aspects of its emergence and the crucial role played by ideology. The second considers it as a social movement, placing (relatively) rational collective social action at the heart of an analysis that focuses on the reformulation of the Palestinian historical narrative. The third sees it as a development within the Palestinian community's political imagination, stressing the tension between the elements of the Palestinian identity. Although

each approach rests on a different methodological foundation, they by no means contradict one another. Many studies have attempted to combine two or all of them in order to better understand the movement. Equally, making this methodological distinction between these different theoretical approaches may help us to understand other Islamist movements.

Adopting one of these approaches at the expense of the others, however, encourages oversimplification or alarmism. Viewing Hamas as one branch of the Islamist tree allows us to better understand its emergence but ignores its subsequent development and the role of collective action and social networks. Overemphasis of the social movement approach may

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109   Hamas demanded 40% of seats in the Assembly.

110   Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 651.

111   Abu Amr, p. 58.

112   Mohsen Mohammad Saleh, "Ḥarakat al-Muqāwama al-Islāmiyya Ḥamās: Qirāʾa fī Raṣīd al-Tajriba (1987-2005)," in: Mohsen Mohammad Saleh (ed.), *Ḥarakat al-Muqāwama: Dirāsāt fī'l-Fikr wa'l-Tajriba* (Beirut: Zeitouniyeh Centre, 2015), p. 51.

likewise lead to an exaggerated idea of Palestinian Islamists' political agency and the independence of the Palestinian political field in a context which is after all settler-colonial. And to view Hamas only as a mere product of the great changes that have taken place in Palestinian identity encourages a linear view of history and deprives social actors of political agency, as well as ignoring the complex dynamicity of society and the multiplicity of possible outcomes. This study thus suggests placing Hamas at the intersection of these three approaches.

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