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Research Article

The Transformation of Hamas: Evolution of the Movement within the Triangle of Society, Arms, and Politics*

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Abstract: This article examines the historical transformation of Hamas, one of the most debated movements in the Middle East, by tracing its evolution from the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood into a multifaceted organization operating across social, political, and military domains. Using the process-tracing method and theoretical insights from case studies on movement transformations, this study explores the structural, organizational, and ideological factors shaping Hamas's trajectory. The findings suggest that while Hamas initially emerged as a social movement, shifting political conditions and external pressures necessitated the development of an armed wing and later a political structure. Rather than following a linear path toward moderation or militarization, Hamas has maintained a fluid strategy, balancing governance, resistance, and social mobilization. This study argues that Hamas's political engagement has reshaped its strategic priorities, but as long as the occupation persists, its military apparatus will remain an integral part of its structure. Ultimately, Hamas's ability to operate simultaneously across social, political, and military spheres has ensured its resilience and adaptability in an evolving regional landscape.

Keywords: Hamas, Palestine, Gaza, Resistance, Social Movement, Islamic Movements

Öz: Bu makale, Ortadoğu'nun en fazla tartışılan hareketlerinden biri olan Hamas'ın tarihsel dönüşümünü ele alarak, onun Filistin Müslüman Kardeşler hareketinin bir kolu olarak ortaya çıkışından itibaren nasıl sosyal, siyasi ve askeri alanlarda faaliyet gösteren çok yönlü bir yapıya evrildiğini incelemektedir. Çalışmada, süreç takibi yöntemi ve hareketlerin dönüşümüne dair vaka çalışmalarından elde edilen teorik çerçeveler kullanılarak, Hamas'ın yol haritasını şekillendiren yapısal, örgütsel ve ideolojik faktörler analiz edilmektedir. Bulgular, Hamas'ın başlangıçta toplumsal bir hareket olarak ortaya çıktığını, ancak değişen siyasi koşullar ve yapısal dinamikler nedeniyle zamanla askeri bir yapı geliştirdiğini ve ardından siyasi arenaya adım attığını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, Hamas'ın dönüşümü tek yönlü bir ılımlılaşma ya da tamamen askeri bir yapıya evrilme gibi keskin geçişlerden ziyade, siyasi yönetim, silahlı direniş ve toplumsal seferberlik arasında kurduğu dinamik ve çok boyutlu bir denge çerçevesinde şekillenmiştir. Çalışma, Hamas'ın siyasi katılımının hareketin stratejik önceliklerini yeniden yapılandırdığını, ancak işgal sürdüğü müddetçe askeri yapının hareketin temel bileşenlerinden biri olarak kalacağını öne sürmekte ve Hamas'ın toplumsal, siyasi ve askeri alanlarda eşzamanlı olarak faaliyet gösterme kapasitesinin, değişen bölgesel dinamikler karşısında direncini ve uyum kabiliyetini korumasını sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hamas, Filistin, Gazze, Direniş, Toplumsal Hareket, İslami Hareketler

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Introduction

The October 7 Operation, known as Al Aqsa Flood, has catalysed a surge of academic interest in the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), one of the most significant movements in the Middle East. The discussions surrounding its capacity for armed resistance against Israeli aggression, its social support base, and its political trajectory necessitate a comprehensive analytical examination of Hamas as a multifaceted movement.

Although scholarly literature on Hamas dates back to its founding, there was a notable increase in studies following its coming to power in Palestine in 2006 and its control over Gaza in 2007. These studies extensively covered Hamas's political performance, its relations with other groups and parties, and its governance capabilities (Abu-Amr, 2007; Berti, 2015; Brenner, 2017; Gunning, 2007). Similarly, research on Hamas's social service activities and its social support network is abundant (Dunning, 2016; Levitt, 2006; Roy, 2011; Szekely, 2015). Another prominent area of study has been Hamas's military capabilities, particularly in the aftermath of intense conflicts with Israel (Bitton, 2019; Dunning, 2015; El Husseini, 2010; Hroub, 2006a). Additionally, significant attention has been given to Hamas's transformation into a political party and its position in the political-military equation (Gleis & Berti, 2012; Long, 2010; Natil, 2015; Rabbani, 2008). Following the 2017 release of its New Policy Document, there have been numerous assessments of Hamas's political transformation (Berti, 2019; Hroub, 2017; Mercan, 2018).

Despite this extensive body of literature, the factors shaping Hamas's trajectory both in the lead-up to October 7 and in the evolving dynamics that followed remain a subject of debate. The unique characteristics of the post-Operation Al Aqsa Flood period, marked by attacks leading to massacres by Israel and unprecedented resistance efforts in Palestinian history, underscore the complexity of the movement's strategic decisions and the broader regional context. However, a holistic examination of historical ruptures in Hamas's evolution and its responses to critical junctures can provide deeper insights into the patterns that have defined its course. This study argues that Hamas has evolved as a hybrid movement, where social, political, and military dimensions are deeply intertwined. Its trajectory has not been shaped merely by internal ideological shifts but also by external pressures, political opportunities, and military imperatives. The post-October 7 period should be analysed within this broader historical framework, considering how Hamas's past transformations have been influenced by these structural factors. Accordingly, this article aims to offer a comprehensive perspective on Hamas's transformations within the context of society, arms, and politics. By doing so, it seeks to fill a gap in the literature, which

often focuses on single dimensions of the movement. Rather than relying on a single theoretical framework, this study will draw upon theoretical assumptions from studies on the transformation practices of hybrid organizations globally, adapting these approaches to the case of Hamas. To analyse the historical context, the method of process tracing will be employed. As a qualitative research method, process tracing facilitates an analytical perspective on Hamas's transformation by "examining causality and temporality through within-case analysis in a single or small number of cases" (Söyler, 2021, p. 68). In other words, "process tracing is an operational procedure for identifying and verifying the observable within-case implications of causal mechanisms," (George & Bennett, 2005).

Transformational Dynamics of Hybrid Organizations

Social movements have been extensively studied in relation to the transformations they have undergone. One significant aspect of this transformation is the categorization of movements into 'old' and 'new' social movements based on their social dimensions. Another key aspect is the rise of 'hybrid movements,' which intertwine social, political, and armed elements. The term 'hybrid' is used here in reference to the concept of 'hybrid organizations,' but it also includes the notion of 'hybrid actors.' The concept of the 'hybrid actor' is introduced to address the limitations of traditional non-state actor (NSA) definitions in explaining certain contemporary movements, particularly Islamic movements. This concept highlights these actors' agency and their ability to influence local policy (Cambanis et al., 2019, p. 16). On the other hand, 'hybrid organization' refers to a movement's simultaneous engagement in social, political, and/or military activities (Berti, 2013, p. 26). Therefore, hybrid movements can be defined as those distinguished by their agency, rather than merely serving as proxies for a sponsor, and possessing the capacity to operate across social, political, and military domains while fluidly transitioning between these fields.

There are significant limitations in analysing movements like Hamas solely through the lens of NSA literature, as this approach often fails to capture their complexity and multidimensional nature. As a hybrid organization, Hamas engages in armed resistance while simultaneously governing the Gaza Strip and providing social services, healthcare, and education. This multifaceted role challenges traditional NSA frameworks, which often disregard governance aspects and thus offer an incomplete understanding of Hamas's legitimacy and power. These gaps have been highlighted by academics such as Hroub (2006a) and Gunning (2007), who contend that viewing Hamas only as a non-state actor ignores its quasi-state functions and its broader socio-political role within Palestinian society. Moreover, the NSA viewpoint frequently

oversimplifies the goals and tactics of organizations like Hamas, reducing them to simplistic labels such as "terrorist" or "insurgent, without considering the broader extensive ideological, social, and political contexts in which these groups operate. For example, Hamas's legitimacy and support base are largely rooted in its Islamic identity and its role as a resistance movement against Israeli occupation. However, the NSA framework often neglects these aspects, focusing instead on its use of violence and non-state status. This reductionist approach risks overlooking the full spectrum of factors that sustain these movements. Therefore, rather than relying on the conventional NSA literature, this article will examine Hamas's evolution through the lens of hybrid organizations, offering a more nuanced study of its fluidity across social, armed, and political arenas.

The academic literature on why and when social movements resort to violence has primarily emerged from the disciplines of social movement studies and terrorism studies. However, these two fields often remain disconnected, leading to gaps in understanding how certain movements undergo armed transformations. Different approaches have been developed to explain the conditions under which movements become radicalized, integrating insights from multiple disciplines to build a more complete picture.

Della Porta (2006) proposes a three-tier model incorporating systemic, organizational, and individual factors to examine the environmental conditions, group dynamics, and individual motivations that contribute to radicalization. Studying political violence in Italy and Germany, she argues that armed transformations occur when structural conditions align with internal movement dynamics. Hazen (2009) adopts a similar approach in her study of Nigerian armed groups, defining them as social movement organizations that regularly use violence to achieve political goals. She identifies six key factors that lead movements toward radicalization: (1) government inaction in response to popular demands, (2) state repression against social protest, (3) an ideology that legitimizes violence, (4) existential threats to the group's survival, (5) resource competition with rival social movements, and (6) perceptions that other movements are too weak to achieve meaningful change (Hazen, 2009, p. 281). These factors highlight the structural and organizational incentives that drive movements to embrace armed struggle rather than maintaining purely social or political engagements.

Similarly, Waldmann (2005) identifies four structural factors that contribute to radicalization: (1) external attacks by state or non-state actors, (2) the absence of a protective authority for targeted minorities, (3) access to logistical and territorial strongholds, and (4) the formation of a common identity and shared destiny. These

elements create a conducive environment for radicalized movements to justify armed struggle, reinforcing the necessity of ideological and operational resilience within these groups. Hazen (2005) further suggests applying the 'protest cycle model' to movement transformations, emphasizing that radicalization is influenced by political opportunities, resource mobilization, group competition, and collective framing of grievances. Political opportunities are shaped by the degree of state repression, accessibility of political participation, alliances, and elite fragmentation. Framing involves constructing narratives that justify violence as a legitimate means of achieving political change. Resource mobilization pertains to securing financial, logistical, and ideological support. Intra-group competition, in turn, can escalate violence as factions within a movement vie for dominance. Alimi (2011) builds on these frameworks by emphasizing the role of relational dynamics in radicalization, highlighting power struggles within movements, unfavourable political opportunity structures, and the escalation of state repression as key drivers of movement evolution.

On the other hand, while some movements escalate into armed organizations, others transition toward political participation. Duhart (2017), in his study of the IRA and ETA, explores the factors that drive this transformation. He argues that prolonged violence can suppress grassroots mobilization, prompting movements to shift toward political engagement. According to Duhart, state repression, which often triggers armed struggle, can paradoxically serve as a catalyst for movements to enter civilian political spaces. Armed groups seeking legitimacy may curb their use of violence to appeal to a broader audience, strategically rebranding themselves as political actors in response to shifting political dynamics.

Van Engeland and Rudolph (2008) identify 'political will' as the primary factor in an armed movement's decision to transition into a political party. They argue that without a strong internal commitment to political participation, structural changes in the political system alone are insufficient to drive transformation. Additional factors include the presence of a coherent political ideology, a structured leadership willing to engage in politics, and the movement's ability to form alliances with local and international actors. Recognition from external stakeholders—whether governments, international organizations, or domestic constituencies—also plays a crucial role in this process, as it reinforces the credibility of political engagement as a viable pathway.

Berti (2013), in her extensive study on Hamas, Hezbollah, and the IRA, proposes a more complex model to explain the formation of political wings within armed movements. She identifies three key variables: (1) environmental (external) factors, (2) organizational dynamics, and (3) individual-level decision-making. Movement

institutionalization, resource mobilization challenges, shifts in political opportunity structures, and internal cohesion all influence a group's decision to establish a political wing (Berti, 2013, p. 3). She critiques linear models that assume political engagement inevitably leads to moderation and disarmament. Instead, she argues that armed and political strategies can coexist within a cyclical process, where shifts between armed struggle and political engagement depend on internal leadership dynamics, political opportunities, and external pressures (Berti, 2013, p. 24). Berti further highlights that political engagement does not necessarily mean a departure from violence; rather, hybrid organizations frequently balance both political and military functions depending on external pressures and internal ideological shifts (Berti, 2013, p. 128-129). Similarly, Zollner (2021) challenges the notion that social movements naturally evolve into political parties. She argues that movements choose to 'partyize' only when they perceive that doing so will enhance their political influence, rather than as a default pathway toward broader public appeal. These perspectives provide essential insights into the fluid and dynamic nature of hybrid movements, particularly in conflict-prone regions where armed and political engagements remain closely intertwined.

Hamas: The Transition from a Social Movement to an Armed and Political Entity

Hamas, which officially declared its establishment during the First Intifada in Palestine in 1987, traces its origins back to the 1940s as a social movement affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In other words, Hamas did not emerge in a vacuum (Awad, 2021). Although its official establishment occurred later under a different name, this article argues that Hamas existed as a social movement long before its official establishment and was built upon the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood (PMB). Despite the fact that this movement, the predecessor of Hamas, soon after its emergence, put on the table the options of arms and politics in the context of the struggle against Israel, it had to remain limited to social movement activities for a long period of time due to periodic circumstances. For nearly three decades, the movement primarily focused on education, religious guidance, and social services. This period ultimately led to a fundamental strategic transformation, culminating in the formal establishment of Hamas, largely driven by structural changes in the regional context.

From the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood to Hamas

In 1946, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood established its headquarters in Jerusalem and experienced rapid growth (Roy, 2011, p. 20), expanding to 38

branches with ten thousand members by 1947. The three years leading up to the 1948 War were pivotal for the organization of the PMB, driven by support from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood for the Palestinian cause and the alignment of the Palestinian national movement with popular religious and social trends. Additionally, the PMB participated in the military struggle against Israel during the 1948 War, albeit in a limited capacity. This historical experience likely influenced Hamas's future military strategies (Hroub, 2000, p. 17-18).

The establishment of Israel in 1948 posed a new challenge for the PMB. After the war, the West Bank came under Jordanian control and Gaza under Egyptian control, leading many of its branches in Israeli-occupied territories to become inactive (Gunning, 2007, p. 27). This division significantly shaped the future of the PMB. Branches in the West Bank merged with the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, focusing primarily on education, proselytizing, and political activities while avoiding military involvement. In contrast, the Gaza branch, which formed the roots of Hamas, operated independently, maintaining close ties with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and actively engaging in both military and political efforts against Israeli occupation (Roy, 2011, p. 21). In fact, the Gaza branch was recognized as the most active political movement in the region until 1954-1955, when Abdel Nasser's anti-Muslim Brotherhood policy in Egypt intensified (Abu-Amr, 1994, p. 7). From that point onward, pressure on Gaza-based organizations intensified, yet armed resistance persisted for a time. In contrast to the Communist groups' preference for 'passive resistance', in the face of the 4-month-long Israeli occupation in 1956-57, the Gaza Muslim Brotherhood participated in an active armed struggle with Baathist groups, leading to the formation of two clandestine military organizations called "Revenge Youth" and "Rights Brigades" (Roy, 2011, p. 21).

In 1954, when Abdel Nasser outlawed the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a pivotal moment emerged for the Gaza branch. With 11 branches and over a thousand members, largely students from refugee camps, the organization was active in Gaza but faced mounting pressures, necessitating a strategic shift. Despite engaging in various activities, including armed struggle, until 1957, the Gaza Muslim Brotherhood significantly weakened thereafter due to the rise of Nasserism in Gaza and Abdel Nasser's backing of a new structure that later evolved into the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Roy, 2011, p. 22). During this period, Khalil al-Wazir, a member of the Gaza Muslim Brotherhood, proposed forming an armed organization with broader ideological appeal, but faced rejection within the organization and Al-Wazir subsequently left to establish al-Fatah (Jefferis, 2016, p. 31). The swift recruitment of many Brotherhood members into al-Fatah's ranks sparked open anti-al-Fatah rhetoric from the Gaza Brotherhood, contributing to enduring divergence between

Palestinian Islamists and nationalists. Concurrently, due to pressure from Egypt, some senior Gaza Brotherhood figures relocated to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, severely weakening the movement's organizational structure (Abu-Amr, 1994, p. 9). As a consequence, from 1957 until the early 1980s, when the foundations for Hamas were laid, the Gaza Muslim Brotherhood pursued a new strategy focusing on cultural resistance, education, and enlightenment activities (Hroub, 2000, p. 27). This shift marked a transition of armed resistance against Israel from Islamists to nationalists (Roy, 2011, p. 22).

After the June 1967 war, the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank caused a decline in Arab nationalism across the region. However, secular nationalist movements in Palestine managed to consolidate their influence, at least temporarily. Despite a partial easing of restrictions on Muslim Brotherhood activities after the war and the re-establishment of communication between its Gaza and West Bank branches, the PMB did not adopt a new strategy for struggle. Instead of pursuing an alternative military approach to support the PLO's anti-Israel efforts, it continued operating as a social movement focused on 'raising a new generation' for the liberation of Palestine (Hroub, 2000, p. 29).

During this period, fuelled by oil revenues from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, the PMB established numerous mosques, youth centres, educational institutions, kindergartens, health clinics, and charity associations. These activities were conducted under the umbrella of the Islamic Centre (al-Mujamma' al-Islami), founded by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin in 1973 (Abu-Amr, 1994, pp. 14-17). The Islamic Centre implemented programs aimed at nurturing a new generation, particularly among university students, and gaining influence in local and union elections. Mosques, universities, student clubs, and social centres played active roles in these efforts (Hroub, 2000, p. 31). However, with the rise of political Islam in the region following Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the movement underwent internal structural changes that eventually led to the formation of Hamas (Roy, 2011, p. 24).

Abd Al Aziz Awda and Fathi Shaqaqi, who broke away from the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s to found the Islamic Jihad movement, criticized the Brotherhood's focus on achieving social transformation before engaging in the struggle against occupation. They argued that societal transformation according to Islamic principles and armed resistance against Israel could occur simultaneously (Levitt, 2006, p. 26). This new Islamist challenge posed a significant risk to the Palestinian Brotherhood, which feared losing its younger members to the Islamic Jihad due to its rapid recruitment and military successes (Hroub, 2000, p. 32).

Compounding this challenge was the vacuum created by the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon in 1982, necessitating a new strategy for the Palestinian Brotherhood. In 1983, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin decided to establish two military wings, 'al-Majd' for intelligence operations and 'al-Mujahidin' for attacks against Israel (Mishal & Sela, 2000, p. 34). The period leading up to Hamas's establishment in 1987 functioned as a preparatory phase for broader resistance efforts, including armed struggle.

Simultaneously, the PLO's swift recovery from its Lebanon setback and its success in local and union elections compelled the Palestinian Brotherhood to chart a new course (Roy, 2011, p. 25). The rising popularity of the Islamic Jihad among Islamist factions, coupled with competition with the secular PLO for influence in student clubs and trade unions, prompted the Palestinian Brotherhood to create Hamas, an organization embracing armed resistance. This pivotal juncture led to a resolution of tensions between armed struggle and social reform agendas, accepting that both could coexist.

The Foundation of Hamas

The First Intifada, broke out on December 8, 1987, following the killing of four Palestinians by an Israeli army vehicle, marking a significant Palestinian uprising against Israel's systematic oppression. This uprising quickly spread throughout Gaza and the West Bank, hastening the transformation of the PMB into Hamas. Under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, key figures of the PMB decided to formally establish Hamas as part of a strategic shift they had been preparing for years. The first anti-occupation leaflets were distributed in Gaza between December 11 and 12, followed by their dissemination in the West Bank between December 14 and 15. While Hamas officially declared its establishment in February 1988, December 1987 is widely recognized as the movement's founding, coinciding with the onset of the Intifada (Roy, 2011, p. 25).

During the early phase of the Intifada, Hamas primarily organized protests, strikes, and acts of civil disobedience, while also engaging in limited armed operations, commonly referred to as the 'knife war.' Hamas's grassroots presence served both as a vehicle for resistance against Israeli occupation and a challenge to Fatah's established authority in Palestine. Its 'Islamic identity' and local establishment gave it an advantage in this challenge (Berti, 2013, pp. 82-83). In August 1988, Hamas published its charter, affirming its stance of non-recognition of Israel, adherence to the Muslim Brotherhood tradition, and goal of Islamizing society, solidifying its role as an Islamic and national resistance movement (Hroub, 2013, pp. 235-236).

The Palestinian National Council (PNC)'s declaration in Algiers in November 1988, implicitly accepting a two-state solution, paved the way for Hamas to emerge prominently in Palestinian politics, contrasting with Fatah and the PLO's more conciliatory approach towards Israel. Up until this period, Hamas had not been a primary target of Israeli operations due to the relatively low intensity of its activities. However, by 1989, Hamas emerged as a leading actor in anti-Israeli military resistance, aligning with armed groups prioritizing resistance over reconciliation. In response, Israel escalated its policies of targeted assassinations, repression, and mass arrests from mid-1989 onwards, prompting Hamas to operate under the leadership of Musa Abu Marzook following the arrest of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin (Berti, 2013, p. 83). Facing these pressures, Hamas adapted by reinforcing the integration of its political and military structures, while maintaining the secrecy of its social institutions to mitigate long-term damage. Concurrently, with the arrest of senior figures, political decision-making shifted to leadership outside Palestine (Roy, 2011, pp. 29-30). Over time, this division led to the formation of two separate leadership bodies, complicating Hamas's coherence in political decisions and actions.

In the early 1990s, several key developments transformed Hamas into a formidable political rival to Fatah and established it as a centralized military organization. The Gulf War, the establishment of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the exile of Hamas and Islamic Jihad members to Lebanon, and the Madrid Talks leading to the Oslo Agreement were pivotal in this transformation. During the Gulf War, which began with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, most Arab states sided with the US against Iraq, while Yasser Arafat's Fatah aligned with Saddam Hussein. As a result, Gulf countries cut off aid to the PLO and expelled Palestinian workers, impacting the Palestinian economy. Hamas, adopting an anti-Saddam and anti-US stance, emerged as a viable recipient of Gulf funding while maintaining legitimacy among its base by condemning the US (Gunning, 2007, p. 41).

Hamas intensified its military actions during the Intifada's third year and decided to establish the autonomous Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades after the January 1990 Jerusalem massacre, where 17 Palestinians were killed (Yetim & Kalaycı & Kaşıkçı, 2020, 133). Established between 1991 and 1992, this military structure concentrated on armed operations against Israel and significantly enhanced Hamas's legitimacy within Palestinian society. Operated largely independently due to its clandestine nature, the Qassam Brigades gained regional recognition and funding.

In 1992, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin deported 415 Hamas and Islamic Jihad members to Lebanon to weaken Islamic organizations in Palestine. They remained in the Lebanese-Israeli border region until media and external pressures

facilitated their return in 1993. During their exile, they received training and support from Hezbollah/Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and acquired new military tactics, a process that increased Hamas's military and political influence in Palestine (Gleis & Berti, 2012, pp. 121-122). Finally, the Madrid Talks and Oslo Agreement in the early 1990s, promoting a two-state solution endorsed by Arafat and Fatah, led Hamas to reject bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Israel, advocating resistance over negotiations (Roy, 2011, pp. 31). This stance positioned Hamas as a political alternative while intensifying attacks against Israel.

Hamas's challenge to the PLO, asserting that it had lost its status as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, intensified in 1992-93. Acknowledging Hamas's increasing influence, the PLO sought to consolidate its political dominance by forming alliances with leftist groups in elections for trade unions and professional chambers. The PLO succeeded in winning elections in the Chamber of Lawyers and Engineers but faced defeat in the Chamber of Commerce elections, where Hamas emerged victorious. In Ramallah, traditionally a Fatah stronghold, Hamas also won the Chamber of Commerce and Teacher's College elections, underscoring its status as the PLO's primary political rival in Palestinian politics (Mishal & Sela, 2000, pp. 90-91). This leadership rivalry took on new significance with the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PA) following the Oslo Accords.

The Palestinian National Authority and Hamas's Engagement in Institutional Politics

The Fatah-led PLO, which recognized Israel's right to exist in the Oslo Accords, consolidated its position against Hamas as Israel reduced its presence in the West Bank and Gaza, leading to the establishment of the internationally recognized Palestinian National Authority (Berti, 2013, p. 85). At its inception, the PA received substantial financial support, amounting to 2.1 billion dollars from 25 countries, to establish official institutions governing various state affairs, including economic and social services, under the leadership of Yasser Arafat (Roy, 2011, pp. 33). This was initially viewed positively by many Palestinians who had long endured occupation and oppression. Although the Oslo Accords faced strong opposition from many Palestinian resistance organizations, including Hamas, public sentiment gradually shifted in favour of the PLO following the agreement (Milton-Edwards, 1999, p. 163).

In response to this new challenge, Hamas devised a three-pronged strategy to sustain its political influence and support base: a) continuing controlled attacks against Israel, b) keeping lines of dialogue open with Fatah while politically opposing the PA, and c) striving to increase social and political support among the population (Roy, 2011, pp. 35). While Hamas continued to prioritize armed resistance as its

preferred method against Israel, it acknowledged public approval of Israel's partial withdrawal and moderated its armed actions accordingly. Recognizing the risks of direct confrontation with the PLO, Hamas criticized the PA primarily on grounds of corruption and mismanagement, prioritizing the protection of its social institutions and avoiding clashes with PA security forces (Yetim & Kalaycı & Kaşıkçı, 2020, 140). However, Fatah resorted to repression and arrests to curb Hamas after the PA's formation (Gleis & Berti, 2012, pp. 122).

During this period, while Hamas leaders in the diaspora firmly opposed compromise with the PA and ceasefire agreements with Israel, leaders in the Palestinian territories favoured a strategy that reduced military operations and considered participating as political actors within the PLO-dominated framework. Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, leading the domestic political leadership, entertained the idea of participating in the Palestinian Parliament elections in January 1996 under certain conditions. In contrast, diaspora leaders argued that forming a party and participating in these elections would legitimize the Oslo Accords. The prevailing view among diaspora leaders favoured building political influence through legal and social assistance networks, grassroots political activities, and military operations rather than engaging in elections under the current political order (Gleis & Berti, 2012, pp. 124). As a result, despite some encouragement for members to run independently, Hamas decided to boycott the elections, shelving the debate on forming a political party until much later (Hroub, 2000, p. 106).

Following the unsuccessful Camp David Summit, where Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat met under the mediation of US President Bill Clinton, the Second Intifada erupted in September 2000. Rampant corruption, nepotism, and autocratic governance since 1994 had eroded public support for Fatah by 2000, exacerbated by worsening economic conditions for Palestinians. Despite the establishment of the PA, Israeli settler policies remained oppressive, and hopes for a peaceful environment had all but vanished. The Second Intifada, emerging in this context, shifted attention away from blaming Hamas for social costs related to its military actions and from marginalizing it for rejecting peace negotiations (Gunning, 2007, pp. 48-49). Until Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Hamas conducted numerous military operations, capitalizing on the period between 1996 and 2000 to bolster its political power and challenge Fatah's dominance more aggressively than before.

The assassinations of several senior Hamas leaders (Salah Shehadeh, Ismail Abu Shanab, Ahmad Yassin, Abdel Aziz Al-Rantisi) between 2000 and 2005 did not weaken the movement; instead, it strengthened public perception that armed

resistance was the sole viable solution (Gunning, 2007, p. 50). This strengthened Hamas's social base and reignited discussions about participating in elections as a distinct political party, a topic initially broached in 1996, which resurfaced after Yasser Arafat's death in 2004 (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 124).

As of 2004, a radical shift in the political landscape provided Hamas with a newfound determination to engage in the existing political framework, leading the movement to participate in the 2004-2005 municipal elections and the 2006 parliamentary elections. Hamas, which continued to engage in student union and professional chamber elections under the Oslo framework, also viewed municipal elections similarly, arguing for its participation as long as there was no interference from the PA or Israeli authorities (Hroub, 2000, p. 219). Hamas's shift in approach to general elections after 2004 was not driven by a change in its stance on the Oslo Agreement, but by the belief that the Oslo framework had effectively collapsed following the Second Intifada. Under these new circumstances, the political leadership's inclination towards forming a political party gained prominence, marking a departure from the stance prior to the 1996 elections (Gunning, 2007, pp. 50-51).

Hamas tested its public support in the local elections and achieved significant success by gaining 74 out of 132 seats in the parliamentary elections, marking its first entry under the name of the Change and Reform List (*2006 PLC Elections Results*, 2006). The main factors contributing to Hamas's victory were the loss of faith in peace negotiations among the Palestinian people, the PLO's inability to ensure economic stability, Hamas's prominent role in the fight against Israel, and its social infrastructure providing basic services to Palestinians (Yetim & Kalaycı & Kaşıkçı, 2020, 144). Following the elections, Hamas swiftly formed its cabinet but faced objections from Fatah representatives. Consequently, the Palestinian political system de facto split into two, with a Hamas-affiliated government established in Gaza and the Salam Fayyad-led government, dominated by Fatah, emerging in the West Bank (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 127). This division has geographically and demographically divided Palestinian politics, prompting the international community to support the West Bank Government and impose sanctions on the Hamas Government. The undermining of Hamas's experience in coming to power through democratic elections by internal and external actors forced a radical stance, leading it to take control of Gaza through military intervention.

Koss (2018) argues that Hamas's conception of political order should be evaluated in two distinct phases. She categorizes the period between 2005 and 2007, from Israel's withdrawal from Gaza to Hamas's establishment of an alternative government in the territory, as one of 'state-building and pluralism.' She contends that this period best

reflects Hamas's true vision of political order. During this time, Hamas maintained its commitment to 'resistance,' pursued a civilian governance model informed by Islamic principles, and emphasized power-sharing and pluralism in principle. However, conflicts with Fatah and the isolationist policies of international actors led to a second phase, beginning with Hamas's takeover of Gaza, which continues to this day. In this phase, which Koss terms 'security through resistance,' Hamas, prioritizing the maintenance of its power, had to adopt a security-oriented political order dictated by prevailing conditions, even though it could not fully implement its ideal political vision (Koss, 2018, p. 124).

The three political programs published by Hamas between 2005 and 2007 support Koss's argument. The October 2005 Electoral Declaration of the Change and Reform List, the Draft Program of the National Unity Government, and the March 2006 Government Program all highlight significant shifts in Hamas's ideological framework and the institutional politics it pursued. Each of these documents diverged from Hamas's 1988 Charter of Establishment in key aspects of content and language. The Electoral Declaration of Change and Reform allocated less emphasis to the movement's traditional principles of 'Islam' and 'jihad' compared to the Founding Charter, instead focusing on Hamas's 'civilian' perspective on domestic politics and the idea of national unity based on pluralism. The Declaration was permeated with a reformist tone, addressing critical issues such as the fight against corruption, inter-party dialogue, public freedoms, and minority rights (Hroub, 2006b, p. 8-9).

The Draft Program of the National Unity Government outlined Hamas's attempts to form a technocratic national coalition government with other Palestinian political parties, particularly Fatah, after winning the Palestinian parliamentary elections. This thirty-nine-article draft program exhibited a more moderated Islamic tone and a reduced emphasis on resistance compared to the electoral manifesto. Moreover, it raised crucial issues related to the fundamental functions of a nation-state through its references to domestic political reforms. Notably, this draft tacitly opened the door to a two-state solution, without recognizing Israel, by stipulating that Israel must completely withdraw from the territories it occupied in 1967, including Jerusalem (Koss, 2018, p. 107). The March 2006 Government Program, which continued the themes of occupation, resistance, and Islamic principles found in the earlier documents, notably omitted any mention of the 'implementation of Sharia law' that had appeared in the electoral manifesto. Instead, the program prioritized improving the daily lives of Palestinians, with a particular focus on security and anti-corruption efforts, reflecting Hamas's evolving vision of political order. As a consequence, as Hroub asserts, all three documents represent a significant evolution in Hamas's political thought. While they continue to emphasize 'resistance,' they increasingly

incorporate references to 'state-building,' highlighting Hamas's adaptation to the changing political landscape (Hroub, 2006b, p. 23-25).

After coming to power, Hamas engaged in conflicts with Israel in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021, demonstrating its willingness to fight when necessary. However, it has also avoided unnecessary confrontations that could undermine its political achievements by preventing the creation of a perpetual state of war (Dunning, 2016, p. 70). In this context, Hamas has prioritized reconciliation talks among Palestinian factions, striving to convince the public that it does not adhere to an 'absolute power' approach that excludes power-sharing. The Egyptian-brokered Hamas-Fatah talks in May 2011 (*Al Arabiya*, 2011)), the 'Doha Declaration' signed by Khaled Meshaal and Mahmoud Abbas in Qatar in February 2012 (*Al Jazeera*, 2012), and the 'Algiers Declaration' signed in October 2022 by representatives of 14 Palestinian factions to end the 15-year split between Hamas and Fatah (*Reuters*, 2022), are significant indicators of the importance Hamas places on the political arena.

In this context, the 2017 New Political Document marks a significant shift in Hamas's history. This change, first hinted at in the three documents published in 2005-2006, revealed Hamas's intention to secure a place in the international system by combining civil politics with resistance (Mercan, 2018, p. 75). In other words, the rhetorical shift that began with Hamas's decision to participate in politics in the 2000s was fully articulated in the 2017 Political Document. This 42-article document includes three notable departures from the founding charter. First, Hamas expressed openness to a two-state solution, stating it would accept the 1967 borders without recognizing Israel, provided that an independent and sovereign Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital is established. Second, Hamas made no reference to the Muslim Brotherhood, signalling its continued path as an autonomous movement. Third, the document distinguished between Zionists and Jews, emphasizing that the fight against the Zionist project is not a war against Jews because of their religion (YDH, 2017). In essence, with the 2017 document, Hamas declared its intent to emphasize civilian politics while keeping the option of resistance in reserve, taking international public opinion into greater consideration, and showing a reluctance to engage in conflict with Israel in the absence of provocation.

However, this process of moderation, which highlighted Hamas's political evolution, did not prevent the October 7 Operation Al Aqsa Flood. Hamas, which launched this operation during what was considered the most moderate phase of its history, faced the risk of isolation and marginalization in Palestinian politics—not due to a concealed military agenda, but rather as a result of shifting regional and international political dynamics, particularly the normalization of relations between

certain Arab states and Israel. Despite its well-intentioned efforts to prioritize politics, Hamas has been unable to fully demonstrate how its political moderation, as articulated in the 2017 Political Document, would transform the movement's overall structure. The post-October 7 experience has reinforced Hamas's emphasis on maintaining both its social-political and military identity.

Evaluating Hamas's Evolutionary Changes

Hamas has undergone significant transformations shaped by structural and organizational factors preceding its official formation. The Palestinian Brotherhood initially prioritized social struggle but later shifted to armed resistance during the British occupation and in response to the presence of Zionist militias. Waldmann's (2005) 'four-factor' explanation for movement radicalization provides a useful lens for understanding this shift within the Palestinian Brotherhood. These factors include aggressive actions by occupying powers and militaristic societies preparing for occupation, the absence of state or resistant powers against Palestinian oppression, the sanctity attributed to Masjid al-Aqsa, and the collective belief in defending Palestinian lands as a religious duty. The presence of a distinct identity and relatively 'liberated areas' like Gaza facilitated and legitimized military methods for the Palestinian Brotherhood's resistance efforts.

Over time, the Gaza and West Bank branches primarily engaged in social movement activities in response to evolving political circumstances. The West Bank branch avoided actions conflicting with the Jordanian regime, while the Gaza branch feared repercussions from Abdel Nasser's anti-Brotherhood policies. These decisions directly correlate with Duhart's (2017) concept of 'intense/regular pressure,' a reason why movements abandon armed struggle. Moreover, difficulties in mobilization resources, as emphasized by Berti (2013), also contributed to the Palestinian Brotherhood's shift toward civilian-focused activities. Additionally, the Brotherhood's reluctance to adopt Khalil al-Wazir's proposal for escalated military action further weakened its support base, leading it to cede armed struggle to other groups that anticipated unsustainable pressure. Thus, by not outright opposing armed resistance, the Brotherhood pursued survival as a social movement, employing "recruitment, alliances, propaganda, and mobilization" (Duhart, 2017, pp. 537-538) to sustain its mass support.

Although Hamas began re-establishing its military structure in the early 1980s and emphasized the creation of a 'resistance generation' over the decades leading up to its official establishment (Hroub, 2006a, pp. 14-16), various structu-

ral and organizational factors played crucial roles in revitalizing its military wing. The emergence of more radical currents within Islamic movements following the Islamic Revolution in Iran constituted one such structural factor that compelled Hamas to reassess its strategic approach. Concurrently, internal disputes within the Palestinian Brotherhood, described by Hazen (2009) as intra-group rivalry and by Alimi (2011) as intra-movement power struggles, materialized when former members broke away to form Islamic Jihad. Islamic Jihad's focus on armed struggle resonated significantly within the Palestinian Brotherhood's base, prompting the movement to reconsider its previously delayed military agenda. Additionally, amidst competition with other social movements (Hazen, 2009, p. 281), the decline in influence of the PLO following its expulsion from Lebanon was viewed as a strategic advantage, necessitating Hamas to engage comprehensively, including through its armed wing, in the struggle for dominance. This process culminated in the formal establishment of Hamas and the formation of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades as a dedicated unit focused on military operations. Meanwhile, Fatah's peace negotiations with Israel shaped the local context, bolstering Hamas's position, while financial aid from Gulf countries and Iran post-Gulf War, along with military and logistical support from Hezbollah for Islamic movement members exiled to Lebanon, were pivotal 'external support elements' (Hazen, 2009, pp. 283-285) that enhanced Hamas's military capabilities.

It makes sense to revisit Waldmann's (2005) 'four-factor' explanation of Hamas's military capacity and the sustainability of the struggle. The first component identified by Waldmann is the influence of outside attacks on a group's tendency toward radicalization. Regarding Hamas, its military posture has been greatly impacted by Israel's ongoing military pressure, which includes frequent military incursions, blockades, and targeted murders of its leaders. In addition to influencing Hamas's operational strategies, these aggressions have strengthened the organization's martyrdom and resistance narrative. The second factor is the absence of a protective authority capable and willing to defend the Palestinian population. The perceived inadequacy of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in safeguarding Palestinian interests, combined with its participation in peace processes that failed to deliver tangible benefits, created a power vacuum. Hamas capitalized on this void, positioning itself as the defender of the Palestinian people. This perceived absence of effective governance and military protection further legitimized Hamas's commitment to armed struggle. The third component highlights the significance of territorial control and logistical capabilities. Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip provides it with a largely independent operational base, minimizing external interference.

Because of its ability to dominate territory and the concentration of its followers within Gaza, Hamas has been able to effectively manage the logistics of its military operations, consolidate its power, and shield itself from the PA and Israel. Lastly, a key component of Hamas's military strategy is the development of a shared identity and collective destiny. With the skilful weaving of Palestinian nationalism with Islamist doctrine, Hamas has created a collective identity among its adherents. This identity is based on a common experience of being uprooted and suffering, as well as a hope for ultimate triumph and freedom. The cohesion and devotion of Hamas's base has been strengthened by the organization's use of historical and religious symbolism in its speech.

Hamas, which initially debated participating in Palestinian elections following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, made the decision to form its political party wing in the mid-2000s. The movement's decision not to participate as a separate party in the 1996 general elections was primarily influenced by internal disagreements among its leadership regarding the legitimacy of engaging in elections under the Oslo Accords framework, and the absence of a conducive political environment where it could compete fairly with Fatah (Berti, 2013, p. 127). Additionally, Zollner's (2019) emphasis on the role of 'political influence' in the decision-making processes of social movements helps explain why Hamas refrained from forming a political party in the 1990s. According to Hamas, prioritizing cause, social assistance networks, grassroots political awareness campaigns, and military operations was deemed more impactful than entering the electoral arena through party formation within the emerging political system.

Moreover, Berti's (2013) framework on the dynamics of political party formation, highlighting 'institutionalization, resource acquisition challenges, positive shifts in political opportunities, and internal consensus for change,' sheds light on the hurdles Hamas faced in its initial attempts to establish a party. She argues that while Hamas experienced growth and institutionalization in the early 1990s, resource constraints emerged with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. However, she contends that there was no favourable change in political opportunities and consensus among leadership cadres for transformative action (Berti, 2013, p. 127). Yet, with the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004 and subsequent shifts in political dynamics along with other factors, Hamas decided to pursue party formation. Despite facing internal and external pressures after its victory in the 2006 general elections, which initially hindered its political identity, Hamas reinforced its military structure post-2007, positioning it as a guardian of its political struggle. Con-

sequently, Hamas exemplifies a distinct hybrid movement where social, political, and armed strategies are closely intertwined.

Given the transformations Hamas has undergone, Berti (2013) questions whether its evolution into a political party will lead to a strategic shift toward 'moderation' and 'disarmament.' She examines the relationship between Hamas's political and armed wings based on her own hypothesis. The varying approaches within Hamas's leadership have at times caused divisions between the political and military leadership, as well as between internal and external (diaspora) leadership. Hamas, whose internal organization has experienced periodic shifts between cooperation and competition, prominently displayed unity between its socio-political and military wings from 1987 to 1994. Conversely, it faced internal conflicts between different factions regarding participation in elections under the new political order from 1994 to 2000.The need for a military wing during the Second Intifada renewed strategic alignment among Hamas's leadership. However, the decision to participate in elections between 2004 and 2006, and the subsequent acquisition of power, caused the political wing to regain prominence and diverge from the military leadership. Yet, pressure applied to the Hamas Government led the military and political wings to act in concert once again. The movement initially turned to political initiatives during the Arab Spring, re-establishing a balance between its political and military wings following the overthrow of Morsi (Berti, 2013, p. 128).

Berti (2013) argues that since these historical transformations did not lead to long-term conflicts among leadership factions or create circumstances favouring the political wing, it would be erroneous to expect Hamas to move toward a moderate identity by diminishing its armed struggle. This developmental process, without requiring fundamental strategic changes, allows Hamas to persist as a hybrid actor operating across multiple dimensions. However, long-term internal conflicts and the outcome of the Palestinian reconciliation process could influence Hamas's future trajectory (Berti, 2013, p. 129).

Conclusion

Hamas, a multifaceted movement with its social base, armed wing, and political structure, has undergone a transformation shaped by external pressures, political opportunities, and internal strategic recalibrations. While its official establishment in 1987 marked the beginning of an organized resistance movement, its historical roots extend back to the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, which prioritized social activism before gradually incorporating political and military components. The

conditions of occupation and the absence of a viable political alternative pushed Hamas toward armed resistance, but over time, its social and political dimensions have gained increasing prominence in shaping its trajectory. Rather than operating solely as a militant organization, Hamas has sought to integrate governance and social mobilization into its strategy, reflecting an attempt at state-building alongside resistance. The reforms in its political orientation suggest that Hamas envisions itself as more than just an armed group, striving to maintain a balance between governance and resistance. However, its military struggle has remained a structural necessity, forcing a constant interplay between military and political decision-making. This fluid transition between social, political, and military spheres has allowed Hamas to sustain its influence despite changing political realities.

Crucially, Hamas has not been able to pursue its political and social transformation under normal conditions but has instead adapted to circumstances dictated by conflict and external pressures. The process leading up to October 7, unfolding during what had been its most politically engaged period, underscores this dynamic. Rather than evolving in a linear fashion toward political integration or military escalation, Hamas has operated within a hybrid framework, where its role as a political, military, and social actor remains deeply interconnected. This study highlights the broader significance of hybrid movements, demonstrating that engagement in multiple domains not only preserves their armed capacity but also enhances their ability to navigate complex political and social landscapes.

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