



From Terrorism to Political Participation

THE CASES OF HAMAS AND ISLAMIC
JIHAD



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In today's "war on terror," the world regularly debates the mechanics of counterterrorism measures in the context of military action. Debates over the use of torture, drone strikes, and intelligence often dominate counterterrorism discussions. In the face of these militaristic discussions of terrorism and counterterrorism, it is surprising that most terrorist groups do not end as a result of military or even of police action. Instead, 43 percent of terrorist organizations end as a result of involvement in the political process. There are many well-known examples of terrorist organizations that have become involved in the political process through the creation of a political party and participation in elections. Hezbollah in Lebanon has had a strong standing in the legislature of the country. The group also participates in other nonviolent actions such as charity work and service provision within Lebanon. The African National

Congress in South Africa, led by Nelson Mandela, was very successful in politics at the end of the apartheid following its history as a violent terrorist organization. Sinn Féin remains a dominant political party in Northern Ireland and has a history of very close ties to the terrorist organization of the Irish Republican Army. What causes a terrorist group to enter the political arena? Scholars have proposed three possible answers to this question: external pressures, shifts in ideology, and changes in the organizational strength of a group. Per the first theory of external pressures, Leonard Weinberg views actions of the state as a key factor in influencing the political transition of terrorist organizations.² In addition to the state, public forces may work from outside of the terrorist organization to influence the group to participate or abstain from involvement in national elections. The second argument focuses on a group's ideology. Shifts in a terrorist group's ideology may make the organization more or less likely to become politically involved. This is the position that Julie Herrick takes in her study of the political transitions of Hamas and Hezbollah.³ Lastly, the organizational structure and strength of an organization may influence the political participation of a terrorist organization. Peter Krause explores the impact of organizational strength on terrorist organizations' use of violence in his study of the Palestinian National Movement and the Algerian National Movement.⁴

This paper explores the validity of these explanations by analyzing Hamas' decision to participate in Palestinian elections in 2006 after abstaining from involvement in 1996. This analysis is deepened by comparing Hamas' decisions at the time of these two elections to that of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a group that did not participate in either election. The analysis of these two groups finds that on the basis of group membership, public popularity, and the number of attacks, the organizational strength of

a terrorist organization is the most important consideration for participation in elections.

The Palestinian Movement

This study applies these three competing explanations to the Islamic terrorist movement in Palestine, in particular to the organizations of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. Hamas was founded in the late 1980s and has maintained its identity as a religious nationalist organization dedicated to expelling Israel from historic Palestine and creating an Islamic Palestinian state.⁵ The Islamic Jihad emerged in 1980 also as a religious nationalist organization with the immediate goal of destroying and expelling Israel from historic Palestine.⁶ The groups exist within the same nation and find particular support within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Their similar foundations and identical goals make these cases particularly unique for comparison.

National elections were held in Palestine in both 1996 and 2006, years after Hamas and Islamic Jihad emerged as organizations and commenced terrorist activities. During this time, both groups achieved recognition within the Palestinian population and also within the world as terrorist organizations.⁷ At the time of the 1996 elections, both Hamas and the Islamic Jihad abstained from participation in the political process. Neither party ran candidates for election, both instead choosing to oppose the national elections. However, in 2006, while Islamic Jihad maintained its position in refraining from participation in national elections, Hamas ran for election and shocked the world with a landslide victory in positions to the Palestinian Legislative Council.⁸

Hamas and the Islamic Jihad pose as an interesting case study, because the groups maintain identical end goals and have utilized similar tactics, such as bombs and suicide attacks, in pursuit of those goals.

“Terrorism is a tool for the weak, employed when no other options appear likely to spark change.”



Hamas rally in Ramallah, 2007. Wikimedia Commons.

The similar Islamic ideologies of the group provide a unique view into the ideology explanation for participation in electoral processes. The impact of any slight differences in ideology on political participation will be noticeable among the similarities of these two groups. The effect of external pressures will also be more apparent among Hamas and Islamic Jihad, because they exist within the same nation and culture. Differences in external funding or government treatment towards the groups can be isolated within the Palestinian context. Factors such as general support for violence and any historical events impacting the entire country are held constant. Lastly, the groups are arguably the two strongest groups in Palestine behind Fatah, which now more strongly identifies with the Palestinian Authority. As the two most popular organizations still identified as outsiders to the national government, Hamas and Islamic Jihad provide an opportunity to study the effect of organizational structure and strength on the decision to participate in elections.

Hamas: 1996 and 2006

Hamas' unique ideology has made the group more open to political involvement than other Islamic terrorist organizations. Hamas emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood, which focused on social and political

activities, and inherited its social welfare network after splitting from the group.⁹ Hamas has since maintained the Muslim Brotherhood's strong focus on grassroots social work.¹⁰ This suggests that Hamas' outlook has always been focused on more than the destruction of Israel. The group is also dedicated to the social welfare of the Palestinian population. In addition, Hamas demonstrates internal democratic practices in electing their leaders of the terrorist organization, revealing an openness to electoral processes.¹¹

These factors are indicators of a willingness to participate in national politics even since the foundation of the organization.

Hamas desires a utopian Islamist society, based on Sharia law but which also incorporates public elections.¹² However, this theoretical openness to elections does not sufficiently explain why Hamas ran for election in 2006 after boycotting the 1996 national election; the organization's official political theory has remained stable throughout this time period.¹³ However, the heterogeneous nature of Hamas' organization allows for conflicts and tensions to exist in the group's ideology. A "fundamental tension" within the group exists between the "focus on institution-building and its commitment to armed struggle."¹⁴ Though these tensions have existed since the group's foundation, it is possible that the balance between the focuses on institutions and armed struggle shifted slightly in favor of one side or the other at the time of the elections.

Many of the external pressures that Hamas faced in 1996 and 2006 were similar and therefore cannot explain Hamas' different views on the national elections during those years. Public support and anticipated participation in the elections were high prior to the national elections in both years.¹⁵ Hamas, in

opposing the elections, sided with the minority of individuals in the survey, only 16.7 percent believed that opposition to the elections was right; 63.2 percent of those surveyed believed that opposing the elections was the wrong choice.¹⁶ As a result, Hamas' decision to boycott the elections in 1996 actually contradicted the external pressure of public opinion. In a similar poll in 2005, the public again favored participation in the elections, with 75.1 percent of people in the West Bank and Gaza planning to vote.¹⁷ At this time, Hamas followed the trend of public opinion and participated in the national elections.

The effect of changes in foreign support also appears to be negligible in Hamas' decision to participate in Palestinian elections. In 1995, Iran's financial support of Hamas encouraged the group "to resist Israel and the peace process through violence and terrorism."¹⁸ This financial support meant that Iran had influence in the strategies utilized by Hamas, and Iran was advocating for violence. However, Iran was still supporting Hamas in 2005 when the decision was made to participate in national elections. In fact, the US Department of State indicated that throughout the

year, "Iran maintained a high-profile role in encouraging anti-Israeli terrorist activity... rhetorically, operationally, and financially," providing the group with "extensive funding, training, and weapons."¹⁹ Despite this continued utilization of Iranian resources, Hamas in 2006 chose to run for election, placing into question the effect that Iranian support for violence had in the decision to boycott the elections in 1996.

The clearest argument for why Hamas boycotted elections in 1996 but chose to run in 2006 is evidenced by a shift in the group's organizational strength. Attacks perpetuated by Hamas during these time periods indicate a substantial increase in the organizational strength of the group. Hamas participated in 80 terrorist attacks in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza from 1989 to 1996, killing 179 and injuring 549 individuals.²⁰ While this number of attacks and casualties over a seven-year span is indicative of a strong organization, the numbers more than doubled from 1996 to 2006. Following the decision to boycott the 1996 elections, Hamas was involved in 178 incidents of terrorism.²¹ 632 individuals were killed and 2,468 were

An Israeli soldier stands near an Islamic Jihad poster, which celebrates the martyrdom of a suicide bomber who killed three Israelis and injured many more in May 2003. Wikimedia Commons.



injured in these attacks.²² The increase in number of attacks and casualties demonstrate a growth in the capacity of Hamas as an organization. This increasing strength put Hamas in a better position to become involved in the bargaining of the political process.

Size of the organization and public support for the group further demonstrates Hamas' organizational strength. In 1996, Hamas was a dominant organization relative to other terrorist organizations in the region. Its official membership size was unknown, but it maintained tens of thousands of supporters and sympathizers.²³ Furthermore, a poll conducted in January 1996 found that 12.3 percent of individuals in the West Bank and Gaza Strip trusted Hamas more than any other Palestinian political or religious faction, a percentage of supporters second only to Fatah.²⁴ Though substantial for a terrorist organization, this support was not enough to encourage political participation at that time. By 2006, however, the numbers had increased. The percentage of individuals in the West Bank and Gaza who stated that they trusted Hamas most out of all Palestinian political and religious factions increased 7.5 percent to a total of 19.8 percent.²⁵ This substantial increase in public trust is particularly important in the organization's decision to run, because elections rely on the public's perceptions of candidates and the groups and parties that those candidates support.

These measurements of the organizational strength of Hamas in 1996 and 2006 show significant successes in the group's terrorist campaign as well as its campaign for public support and trust. As the group gained strength, particularly in the realm of public opinion, it also gained bargaining power that could be utilized in the political arena. The frequency and impact of the violence demonstrated to the public, the government, and Israel that Hamas was a substantial opponent and player within Palestine. Terrorism is a tool for the weak, employed when no other options appear likely to spark change. As Hamas' strength grew, other opportunities for change, particularly the opportunity to participate in electoral politics, became more plausible and the bargaining impact that Hamas would have within the government grew. Changes of this great a magnitude were not present in the group's ideology or the external pressures that it faced. It

appears, therefore, that Hamas' decision to participate in the 2006 Palestinian elections was grounded in the growing organizational strength of the group.

Islamic Jihad: 1996 and 2006

The ideology of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad holds many similarities to that of Hamas. The Islamic Jihad also found its origins from the Muslim Brotherhood, splitting from the group to create a "militant Islamist break-away faction."²⁶ The groups share common goals, to destroy Israel and to establish an Islamic state in historic Palestine, both of which are ambitious, maximalist goals.²⁷ Similar to Hamas, the initial supporters of the Islamic Jihad included young Palestinians, many of whom were well educated. These similarities suggest that Islamic Jihad may maintain many of the same principles as Hamas despite their refusal to participate in Palestinian elections. Therefore, these principles cannot explain the differences in 2006 in the groups' participation or lack thereof in the national elections.

However, there are some ideological differences between the groups that may partially explain why the Islamic Jihad has not shown interest in political involvement. Islamic Jihad prioritizes the elimination of Israel over the creation of an Islamic state, seeing Israel's destruction as a precursor to any viable government.²⁸ According to this view, the destruction of Israel can be achieved only through violent jihad. This extremist, all-or-nothing ideology is not conducive to participation in the slower, give-and-take processes of electoral politics. This contrasts with the institution-building aspect of Hamas' organization, which indicates a more progress-focused outlook towards the goals that both groups pursue. This suggests that ideology may play a role in the predisposition of terrorist organizations, but it still does not explain the variation in a single group's participation across time.

Islamic Jihad faced many of the same external pressures that Hamas faced during the elections. Regarding public pressures, Islamic Jihad decided not to give into the public opinion polls that favored electoral participation in both years and refrain from

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political involvement. A survey conducted in October 1995 found that the majority of Hamas and Islamic Jihad supporters agreed that “elections will promote democracy, will bring about change for the better, will improve economic conditions, and will lead to a legislative council.”²⁹ Both Hamas and Islamic Jihad decided against the majority of their supporters to abstain from elections in 1996. Public opinion towards the elections remained positive in 2006; however, Islamic Jihad, unlike Hamas, continued to refuse participation.³⁰ Islamic Jihad and Hamas’ varied response to this consistent public opinion suggests that public opinion towards the elections was not a strong factor in determining the groups’ position vis-à-vis elections.

Funding and resources from external sources may have played a slightly larger role in Islamic Jihad’s decision-making than it did for Hamas. Islamic Jihad, unlike Hamas, has not received substantial financial support from Palestinian expatriates. Instead, the group is highly dependent on financial support from Iran and a safe haven for its leadership in Syria.³¹ This dependence remained consistent from 1996 to 2006.³² Due to the greater reliance financial reliance of the Islamic Jihad on Iranian support, it is logical that Iran has more leverage over the Islamic Jihad than it had over Hamas. Iran maintained a firm position in promoting violent anti-Israeli terrorism over this time period.

The stark difference in organizational strength of Hamas and Islamic Jihad appears to be the best explanation for why Hamas chose to participate in elections in 2006 while Islamic Jihad refrained. Across both election periods, Islamic Jihad’s organization was not nearly as strong as that of Hamas. From 1990 to

1996, the group was responsible for 22 attacks of terrorism in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, resulting in the death of 23 individuals and injuring 92.³³ This is less than one-third the number of attacks Hamas was responsible for during the same time period and less than one-sixth the number of fatalities. This number grew to 96 terrorist attacks, resulting in 259 deaths and 992 injuries, from 1996 to 2006.³⁴ However, Hamas was responsible for almost double the number of attacks and well over double the number of casualties during this same time period. These differences in the violent campaigns of the organizations suggest that Islamic Jihad was equipped with fewer resources and capacities than Hamas during this time period.

In addition to the number and size of terrorist attacks, group membership and public popularity suggest that Islamic Jihad was much weaker than that of Hamas. As with Hamas, the exact size of the Islamic Jihad membership is unknown, but estimates are much lower than those for Hamas. The popularity of Islamic Jihad in comparison to that of Hamas is also small. In 1995, only 1.4 percent of individuals in the West Bank and Gaza stated that they trusted Islamic Jihad more than any other political or religious faction in Palestine.³⁵ At this time, Hamas maintained the trust of 12.3 percent of the same population.³⁶ In 2005, the percentage of the population that trusted Islamic Jihad more than any other group rose to 3.7 percent but remained dwarfed by Hamas, which boasted 19.8 percent of the West Bank and Gaza.³⁷ Public support generated through the charity network was a “major factor” in Hamas’ electoral victory in 2006.³⁸ Hamas’ charity network helped to create a reputation for the group within Palestine; Islamic Jihad inherited no charitable focus from its split with the

Muslim Brotherhood. The underwhelming amount of public support that Islamic Jihad maintained in 1996 and in 2006 likely discouraged the group from participating in elections. With such dismal support in the West Bank and Gaza, where the group emerged and is strongest, the chances of national electoral victory were slim for the terrorist organization. The group's weakness in membership size and public support could have ended in humiliating losses had Islamic Jihad chosen to participate in elections. This weakness likely discouraged political participation and encouraged the continued utilization of violent means in order to shift the bargaining terms in the group's favor.³⁹

The importance of organizational strength is clear in the examples of Hamas' decision to run in 2006 and not to participate in 1996 as well as in Islamic Jihad's refusal to participate in both elections. In fact, many of the ideological and external pressures mentioned can also be linked back to the strength of the organization. For example, the contradictions found within Hamas' ideology between institution-building and violence are largely a result of the group's size and heterogeneous structure. The negligible impact that Iranian support had for Hamas' electoral participation in 2006 is also an effect of its organizational strength. The group's charitable network and large global support structure allowed Hamas to be more self-sufficient in funding. External, independent resources gave the group more flexibility in its decision to run in the national elections. The Islamic Jihad lacked this strong, independent support network and was therefore more reliant on Iranian funding and subject to Iranian pressure.

Conclusion

The cases of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in 1996 and 2006 offer lessons that are extrapolable to other terrorist groups. These cases suggest that the

organizational strength of a group plays the largest role in explaining the transformation of a terrorist organization to a political party. As demonstrated, ideology may play a role in the predispositions of an organization towards political involvement, with more extremist organizations being less likely to become involved than more progress-focused groups. However, if ideology largely remains constant throughout a group's existence, it is unlikely to explain shifts in one group's position towards elections over time. External pressures may also play a role in political involvement; however, a group becomes more resistant to external influences as its own organizational strength increases. This case study suggests that organizationally stronger terrorist organizations will be more likely to participate in electoral politics than weaker groups.

The main finding of this paper is problematic for counterterrorism strategy, as strengthening a terrorist organization is not the goal of counterterrorism. It would be illogical to argue that counterterrorism strategies should allow groups to grow until the organization has the bargaining power to encourage political participation. The growth in the number of terrorist attacks and casualties that would occur throughout this process, along with the risk of a group becoming too politically influential, are unacceptable. However,

Flag of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine. Wikimedia Commons.



for those attempting to understand and combat terrorism, it is vital to understand the importance of organizational strength and its paradoxical role in encouraging political participation. ♦

ENDNOTES

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