

RISING POLITICAL ISLAM: IS IT A MATTER OF IDEOLOGY OR PRAGMATISM?

This essay focuses on the underlying reasons for Islamist groups becoming politically popular in the Middle East. The main objective is to explore whether Islamist movements in the Middle East, in general, have arisen due to common demand for a religious ideology or whether they developed as a response to failure of existing regimes to address a range of concrete problems. In this respect, this essay aims to demonstrate that Islam as a political ideology has become an instrument for the expression of popular political dissent against existing regimes. It is argued that the rise of political Islam in the Middle East is the consequence of a multi-dimensional crises experienced by the region including failed economic policies, widespread authoritarianism, increasing unemployment, corruption and rapid urbanization. A number of Islamist parties are examined with particular focus on Hamas as the main case.

İrem Aşkar Karakır*



* İrem Aşkar Karakır is a Research Assistant at the International Relations of the Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir, Turkey. She is also currently a Ph.D student in International Relations at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey.

Popular support for Islamist parties is highly influenced by the ability of these parties to offer efficient solutions to political, economic and social problems facing their societies. Followers of Islamist movements are not primarily attracted to the spiritual concentration in the discourse of the Islamists, but to the capacity of these Islamist parties to address socio-economic problems in their societies and their ability to pursue pragmatic approaches to these problems by offering relevant social services. The failures of existing secular regimes to fulfill the expectations of their people have created a fertile ground for Islamist movements to emerge. The core reason why such struggle is appropriated by Islamists is related to the nature of the political regimes existing in many Muslim countries: “closed political systems and authoritarian regimes are highly conducive to growth in the popularity of Islamist political formations and the Islamist ideology.”¹ These regimes have attempted to eliminate any opposition through preventing them from speaking in public places and this attempt has succeeded against secular groups. However, when Islamist groups were involved this strategy largely failed: The messages and activities of these groups can easily spread through mosques and other religious institutions with a religious cover and without attract much attention of respective regimes.

Since the early 1970s, the Muslim Middle East has been confronting a multi-dimensional crisis with political, economic, and social dimensions. This crisis was fed by the authoritarian character of the ruling regimes, rapid population growth, failed economic policies, and unplanned urbanization. Owing to rapid population growth, the Middle East has a rapidly growing labor force and ruling regimes have been unable to provide the required jobs, largely due to their implementation of inward-looking, statist policies.² Unemployment and poverty have largely influenced young people living in the cities, whose resentment has resulted in political unrest. The incompetence of many ruling regimes in the Middle East in fulfilling the expectations of the discontented young people has caused these people to question the legitimacy of their regimes and has led them to join the ranks of Islamist movements.

Therefore, it would be appropriate to suggest that Islamist movements arose out of the disappointment of people with the existing order. The ruling regimes have usually been unresponsive to popular demands, and accordingly they have failed to provide social services for rapidly growing populations. The Islamists’ ability to provide people with goods and services has strengthened popular support for these Islamist movements. Through charitable networks Islamist movements have been able to form the bases for political action. Supporting alienated masses through these networks has increased potential constituencies, and it has been the major component for political mobilization by the Islamists.

¹ Mohammad Ayoob, “The Future of Political Islam: The Importance of External Variables,” *International Affairs* 81 (2005), p. 956.

² Alan Richards, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), p. 91.

Popular support for the Islamists is also related to them being unified, well-organized and active. Islamists have a reputation for effective management of municipalities, NGOs and university councils. In the case of municipal administration, Islamists affiliated to Hizbullah, Hamas or Muslim Brotherhood are known for developing local resources in an effective way for the promotion of education, health care and infrastructure.

Democratization of Islam: The Case of Hamas

Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya) was born as a branch of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, during the first Intifada, at a time when political revival of the Islamist forces was taking place in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The popularity of Hamas has noticeably increased since the beginning of the Oslo Process, as it has been able to establish itself as the “single largest political opposition in Palestinian society through well-calibrated tactics of guerrilla warfare, political alliances, and a pragmatic social agenda.”³ The result of the Palestinian parliamentary elections on 25 January 2006, surprised many, as Hamas won 74 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, and became the ruling party. There were both internal and external factors behind the increasing popular support for Hamas.

One of the main internal factors behind popular support for Hamas has been divergent social services, which have been offered to Palestinians through Hamas’ efficient social networks. Like its mother organization Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas provided Palestinians with social and sports facilities, health clinics and libraries. These social networks have contributed to a relative improvement of living conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza. In return, Hamas was rewarded by increased political support.

Another significant internal factor behind popular support for Hamas was the disappointment of Palestinian people regarding the incompetence of both the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the ruling party al-Fatah in dealing with socio-economic problems. Indeed, widespread corruption and extensive nepotism within both the PNA and al-Fatah deeply shook the trust of Palestinian people in a number of institutions including the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine (PLO). Let alone the hopes for the PNA to become a platform for pluralistic and democratic discussion, it has been turned into a wing of the late Yasset Arafat’s al-Fatah party. Arafat continued to use his personal style of authoritarian rule in the PNA, and thus distinguishing between PNA and Arafat loyalists became difficult for people.⁴ There were widespread rumors about state officials seeking bribes and back-room deals for public work contracts mostly

³ Graham Usher, “What Kind of Nation? The Rise of Hamas in the Occupied Territories,” in Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (eds.), *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 343.

⁴ Beverley Milton-Edwards, “Political Islam in Palestine in an Environment of Peace?” *Third World Quarterly* 17 (June 1996), p. 213.

with Arafat cronies.⁵ PNA representatives refrained from informing people about how the money collected within the Occupied Territories was spent. Moreover, critiques of PNA and al-Fatah intensified to a large extent during the second Intifada due to their failure to provide people with major social services or to inform them about water and electricity supply cuts and gas shortages.⁶

A combination of political corruption, patronage-based economic behavior and lack of personal security provoked demands for increased democracy, welfare, competence and accountability among the Palestinians: this strongly influenced voting attitudes. Whereas offenses of corruption within the PNA deteriorated its image along with that of the PLO and the late Yasser Arafat, Hamas has been free from such charges with a high standing among Palestinians.⁷

The well disciplined organizational structure and carefully planned political program of Hamas has also contributed to its popular support. Its increasing popularity among Palestinians was particularly apparent in the results of elections which were held in professional associations, chambers of commerce, and student councils. In the aftermath of the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP, September 1993), Hamas established a political alliance, namely the 'Popular and Democratic Fronts Bloc', with other opposition groups, including some leftist groups. In fact, taking place in such a political alliance indicated that Hamas is a "pragmatic political movement ready to bypass ideology in order to obtain tangible results."⁸ In Palestine, universities and professional organizations are not independent from politics, since by means of electoral process, political parties compete with each other to gain seats in the administrative councils of both universities and professional organizations. For example, the Popular and Democratic Fronts Bloc won 52 percent of the votes against al-Fatah in the Bir Zeit University student council elections, which was held in late 1993. Following Bir Zeit University student council elections, the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad won 46.7 percent of the votes against al-Fatah in the elections for Gaza Engineers' Association which took place in early 1994. In late 1994 Hamas alone won 91.5 percent of the votes in the elections that took place at the Islamic University of Gaza in late 1994, since "convinced of its defeat, the Fatah withdrew from the elections."⁹ Indeed, results of the recent local elections held in Gaza's ten districts in January 2005 were an indicator of Hamas' forthcoming victory in the parliamentary elections, with Hamas winning a majority of the seats.

Hamas' effective election strategy was also influential in its victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections. Whereas al-Fatah's campaign slogan was; "we need a second chance," Hamas' campaign slogan was "change and reform."

⁵ Dan Connell, "Palestine on the Edge," *Middle East Report* 194/195 (May/Aug 1995), p. 7.

⁶ Rema Hammami and Salim Tamari "Anatomy of Another Rebellion," *Middle East Report* 217 (Winter 2000), p. 3.

⁷ Are Knudsen, "Crescent and Sword: The Hamas Enigma," *Third World Quarterly* (December 2005), p. 1385-1386.

⁸ Iyad Barghouti, "Islamist Movements in Historical Palestine," in Abdel Salam Sidahmed and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.), *Islamic Fundamentalism* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), p. 168.

⁹ Jean-François Legrain, "Hamas: Legitimate Heir of Palestinian Nationalism?" in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism or Reform?* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), p. 165-166.

Hamas organized its election campaign through newspapers, televisions and radio advertisements, SMS messages, e-mails, and internet Web sites. In addition, Hamas' campaign included "door to door visits, and question and answer sessions in diwans (places of family gathering) across the Strip."¹⁰ The poor performance in economic affairs of the PNA and al-Fatah also caused disappointment among Palestinian people and influenced their voting attitudes. As a result of the second Intifada, the Palestinian economy was severely hurt, resulting in increasing unemployment, since the public sector was not able to provide any employment opportunities to many people.¹¹

Political gatherings, Islamic exhibitions, particularly on university campuses, demonstrations and other expressions of protest sponsored by Hamas further contributed to its success in the political realm.

Here, it would also be appropriate to mention the pragmatic approach of Hamas to the PLO. Despite the fact that Hamas perceived the PLO as a rival, particularly during elections of the professional associations and student councils, Hamas was careful to emphasize its good intentions towards Yasser Arafat and the PLO, and declared its readiness to cooperate with PLO. Moreover, Hamas refrained from revolting "when many of its members were arrested by Arafat's police" and "time and again, Hamas declared that its arms were not directed against PNA, but rather at Israel."¹²

Lastly, the noticeably rising power of Hamas on the military front and the inability of the PNA to provide security in the West Bank and the Gaza caused an increase in Hamas' popularity among Palestinians.

There were also external factors that contributed to the increase of popular support for Hamas. The most significant external factor leading to an increase in Hamas' popularity was the failed Peace Process between the State of Israel and the PNA. The Peace Process not only failed to end the occupation, but it also did nothing to improve any aspect of Palestinian life. The increase of Hamas' popularity can thus be viewed in parallel to the PLO's failure to gain from the Peace Process. The Oslo Agreement, together with its Economic Protocol, failed to offer either any economic welfare to Palestinians or any plan for improving the economic structure of the Palestinian side as promised in line with the preamble.¹³ Instead, it has led to a deterioration of daily life in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and a growing dependence on Israel. With the collapse of the peace agreement along with the worsening of daily life conditions, hostility and aggression rose not only between Israelis and Palestinians, but also among Palestinians themselves. The daily humiliations experienced by the Palestinians

¹⁰ "Getting busy in Gaza," *Al Ahran Weekly*, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>, 10-18 January 2006.

¹¹ Leila Farsakh, "Under Siege: Closure, Separation and the Palestinian Economy," *Middle East Report* 217 (Winter 2000), p. 25.

¹² Menachem Klein, "Competing Brothers: The Web of Hamas-PLO Relations," Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Efraim Inbar (eds.), *Religious Radicalism in the Greater Middle East* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p.128.

¹³ Farsakh p 22.

living in the Occupied Territories, and the perception of Hamas by them as the voice of the Occupied Territories further strengthened Hamas. There was also a reaction directed against PLO leaders living outside the Territories, as they were viewed by the Palestinians living inside the Occupied Territories as outsiders. Therefore, the disappointment of Palestinians with the Oslo Peace Process and unsatisfactory policies followed by the PNA during negotiations shook the trust of people in the PNA and al-Fatah, and helped Hamas to take advantage of this situation.

A second external factor behind popular support for Hamas was the political and financial crisis experienced by PLO in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991. During the Gulf crisis, PLO openly supported Saddam Hussein, and this caused frustration among the regimes of the Gulf region, which were sponsoring PLO both politically and financially. The regimes not only reduced their financial aid to a large extent, but also expelled numerous Palestinians working in their countries. This considerable reduction in financial aid and workers' remittances shook PLO's economic plans deeply. Many institutions such as hospitals, clinics and schools had to close their doors or reduce their services.

Financial and moral support from other Islamic movements and several governments in the region also contributed to Hamas' popularity. Hamas enjoyed the support of Islamic communities and organizations not only in Islamic countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, but also those in the United States and Europe. The main reason for this support of Hamas was to resist the Israeli occupation, and to strengthen mobilization against secular forces in the occupied territories.

Finally, Hamas' popularity increased as a result of the immediate counter terrorist attacks Hamas organized in response to Israel's attacks. The popular grief shared by the Palestinians during the funerals of Hamas' leaders Yasin and Rantissi following their assassinations by Israel, the general view among Palestinians that Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza Strip was a result of Hamas' armed struggle, and the failure of Fatah to bring political progress, economic recovery, law and order to Gaza Strip in the aftermath of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza district in August 2005, led to strengthening of Hamas's popularity among Palestinians.

Other Cases of Political Islam: AKP, Hizbullah and Muslim Brotherhood

The electoral victory of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the November 2002 parliamentary elections has raised questions about whether the Turkish society is getting more religious.

There were a number of underlying socioeconomic factors behind this electoral victory. First of all, Turkey had experienced political and economic instabil-

ity with short lived coalition governments for almost a decade prior to 2002. The failure of these coalition governments in achieving “sustained and equitable growth, avoiding costly financial crises, and tackling the problem of pervasive corruption have paved the way for the party’s unprecedented electoral success.”¹⁴ Secondly, the deep economic crisis, which Turkey experienced in 2001, negatively influenced the Turkish society as a whole, and this in return resulted in widespread disappointment with the existing political parties both from the right and left wing. AKP took advantage of being a new formation in the Turkish political system, and followed a pragmatic (relatively un-ideological) approach, prioritizing issues such as social justice and the equal distribution of wealth.

Moreover, AKP’s electoral victory was aided by the fact that AKP members adopted a more liberal line in their speeches than that of members of its predecessor Islamist parties. The ideological differences between AKP and its predecessor Islamist parties enabled AKP to attract the votes of not only religious conservative segment of society, but a broader proportion of the electorate. Unlike other past Islamist parties such as the Welfare and the Virtue Parties which opposed the idea of Turkey’s membership to the European Union, AKP supported Turkey’s membership. AKP emphasized progressive concepts such as democracy, rule of law, human rights, and freedom of expression along with the more conservative agenda of more freedom for religious practices.

Unlike AKP, which was established as a political party from the beginning, Lebanese Hizbullah was born as a military organization, but over time it has experienced significant evolution and acquired a political dimension. Hizbullah was established in 1984, with the aim of resisting Israeli occupation forces in South Lebanon. In 1980s, Hizbullah assumed responsibility for a number of bloody attacks against Israel and the United States including suicide bombings against the U.S. embassy in Lebanon. With the early 1990s, Hizbullah started to follow a pragmatic approach, responding to the socio-economic problems of the society. As a part of this strategy, Hizbullah also integrated into the secular Lebanese political system by gaining eight seats in the parliament with the elections in 1992. Hizbullah has provided divergent social welfare services, particularly to people living in impoverished areas of Lebanon since the government was unable to supply public utilities to these areas. There have been monthly food allocations to poor families. Hizbullah’s services have thus contributed to the improvement of life conditions of many people. In return, this has played a major role in the increasing of both the popularity of Hizbullah among Lebanese people and the increasing votes for Hizbullah’s candidates in the parliamentary elections.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ziya Öniş, “The Political Economy of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party,” M. Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), p. 207.

¹⁵ Popular support for Hizbullah has arisen gradually since, whereas Hizbullah gained nine seats in the parliament in 2000 elections, in 2005 elections Hizbullah added two seats to its nine seats in the parliament. Moreover, for the first time a Hizbullah representative took place in the cabinet as the minister of energy. In the case of the 2004 municipal elections, in South Lebanon Hizbullah captured over 60% of municipalities compared with 55% in 1998 municipal elections.

Although Hizbullah has continued its militancy, mainly in South Lebanon, it has concentrated more on the ballot box than bullets. In this sense, changing socio-political realities have transformed Hizbullah from a militant religious organization with a strict Islamist tone to a legally recognized political party with a tolerant tone. Through time, Hizbullah has chosen to highlight its Lebanese identity and its role as a Lebanese political actor rather than its Islamic identity. In other words, when it was understood that Lebanese political system is not in favor of an Islamic state, Hizbullah became less driven by ideology and more by practical considerations. The confessional political system of Lebanon is a way in which governmental and administrative posts are allocated to the various religious communities. This change in Hizbullah's perception was tied largely to the leadership shift in its financier and advisor Iran, from conservative Ayatollah Khomeini to liberal Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani with the death of the former. Although, its effective armed struggle against Israel has contributed to its widespread political popularity among Lebanese people, Hizbullah has carefully distinguished between its armed branch and its social and political branches. With the recent attacks of Israel in July 2006, Hizbullah once again sustained its legitimacy as the leading power of resistance against Israel, and the main supplier of services to people through party's social networks. It is important to note that in the aftermath of the 2006 war with Israel, "Hizbullah distributed 10,000-12,000 dollars to some 15,000 homeless families as an initial stage in a broad re-housing program that will run for up to three years."¹⁶

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is another Islamist group that developed under unique circumstances. Like Hizbullah, Muslim Brotherhood has also experienced a significant evolution. Muslim Brotherhood has gradually transformed from a religious mass movement to a modern political party.¹⁷ Since Muslim Brotherhood is prevented to act as a legal party, it has reached the public by providing divergent social services in areas such as free health care, financial support, and shelter in times of crisis. Muslim Brotherhood owes its popularity among Egyptians to its generous network of services¹⁸, efficient pooling of contributions to earthquake victims particularly on 12 October, 1992 earthquake and transparency in the collection and distribution of donations.

In return, Muslim Brotherhood has been successful in dominating much of the Egyptian civil society. Professional Associations have been one of the most important components of Egyptian civil society, and Muslim Brotherhood has been able to take control of the major professional associations. Muslim Brotherhood's successful performance in the associations is a result of its efficient organizational skills. On the one hand, Muslim Brotherhood has its own organi-

¹⁶ Nicholas Blanford, "Hizbullah and the IDF: Accepting New Realities Along the Blue Line," *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (Summer 2006): 73, <http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes>

¹⁷ In 1984 Egyptian parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood entered into an informal coalition with the Wafd party and this informal coalition was able to win 57 out of the 448 seats in the National Assembly.

¹⁸ Like many other Islamist groups, Muslim Brotherhood organizes through registered charitable networks.

zations to provide services to people, when the state cannot, while on the other, through electoral politics it has succeeded in taking over many associations and trade unions to influence Egyptian domestic politics.¹⁹

Contemporary Political Islam: A New Reality?

Having examined the factors behind popular support for Islamist parties and analyzed cases of Palestine's Hamas, Turkey's AKP, Lebanon's Hizbullah and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, there are a number of conclusions to be drawn. First of all, Islamist movements in the Middle East, in general, have arisen as a response to failure of existing regimes to address a range of problems including unemployment, rapid urbanization, political corruption, and economic and political instability. Islamist groups have mostly interacted with changing socio-political realities in an effective way, and they have been able to fill the gap resulting from poor or lacking social welfare services by offering people their own services.

Secondly, these Islamist groups have properly adopted their organizational and ideological features to changing socio-economic and political contexts. They have transformed their ideological and revolutionary strategies to pragmatic and dynamic/imaginative approaches, as they have dealt with socio-economic realities. In this regard, they have been aware that the process of providing social welfare services has been the key instrument in increasing the constituency of their parties. Therefore, what really contributes to widespread political popularity of Islamist parties within their societies have been their pragmatic political and social agendas including social welfare networks, campaign strategies and grassroots organizations.

Thirdly, although cases of Hamas, AKP, Hizbullah and Muslim Brotherhood share some similarities particularly with respect to reasons behind popular support for each of them, they are creations of their own national context, and they differ from one another, as each society has a particular historical, political, economic and cultural background.

Fourthly, since success of Islamist movements in the Middle Eastern context has mostly been an outcome of their ability to provide effective solutions to socio-economic problems, continuation of popular support for Islamist movements is closely linked to their perseverance in being responsive to multi-dimensional crises threatening their societies. To put it in a different way, as the number of Islamist groups gaining political power increase, the real challenge for the Islamist movements is no longer the issue of survival, but the issue of producing functional and constructive solutions to socio-economic problems facing their societies.

¹⁹ Unlike Western societies, in Egypt through electoral politics, political parties are represented in professional associations by the party members gaining seats in administrative councils these associations.

An Islamist party included in the political system is different from an Islamist group excluded. When Islamic movements have taken part in legal political systems they have generally become flexible with respect to their ideologies, prioritizing solutions to real problems.²⁰ Political openings to provide political Islamists with opportunities of legal political participation, by and large, results in taming Islamists in the Middle Eastern context.

To conclude, in light of the examination of a number of divergent cases, it is neither surprising nor unexpected that the support for Islamist parties has arisen not because of an inherent rise of extremism but for practical reasons.

²⁰ İhsan D. Dağı, *Ortadoğu'da İslam ve Siyaset* [Islam and Politics in the Middle East] (İstanbul: Boyut Kitapları, 2002), p. 144.
