

*Benedetta Berti*<sup>\*</sup>

---

## Rebel Groups between Adaptation and Ideological Continuity: The Impact of Sustained Political Participation

The question of how involvement in institutional politics and governance affects rebel groups' behaviour is pertinent when studying violent non-state actors, both during and in the aftermath of conflict. This is especially the case when participation in the political system becomes sustained over time. The interactions between the political and governance practices of a rebel group and its overall ideological orientation and state-building aspirations are not sufficiently analysed in the literature, especially in the context of hybrid armed-political organizations operating in latent, frozen or protracted conflicts. This article aims to begin to fill this gap by examining how involvement in institutional politics has shaped both Hamas's and Hezbollah's branding, interpretation and reliance on their own constitutive ideological manifestos, with an emphasis on both organizations' dynamic processes aimed at reconciling political participation with their previous ideological rejection of the legitimacy of the political system and their constitutive calls to dramatically restructure the political order. Based on these detailed accounts, this article reflects on how the complex relationship between politics, electoral competition, governance and ideological principles can shape an armed group's political identity.

**Keywords:** political identity; Hamas; Hezbollah; ideology; electoral competition

THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS – ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE armed, willing and capable of using force to attain their political, economic or ideological goals and not under the formal or de facto control of a state (Petrasek 2000; Schneckener 2009) – both in taking part in institutional politics and in delivering governance – has attracted growing attention in recent years (Arjona 2014; Arjona et al. 2016; Börzel and Risse 2010; Mampilly 2011). Within the broader scholarly debate on the impact and dynamics of rebel opposition

\* Benedetta Berti is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, USA. Contact email: [benedettabe@gmail.com](mailto:benedettabe@gmail.com).

groups' participation in politics (Holmqvist 2005), an especially interesting yet under-researched debate pertains to the question of how these organizations' constitutive ideological beliefs, particularly those concerning the state and their state-building and governance aspirations, are accommodated and reinterpreted over time as a result of direct participation in institutional politics.

The interrelationship between 'rejectionist' or 'radical' ideas developed in wartime and the political practices established in the aftermath of conflict deserves further scrutiny to better understand armed groups' overall political trajectories and their potential role in war-to-peace transitions or democratization processes (Allison 2006; Ishiyama and Batta 2011; Manning 2007). This question is especially salient when participation in the political system becomes sustained over time and extends to direct involvement in politics and governance at both the subnational and national levels. Specifically, a key challenge many rebel opposition groups face in entering institutional politics, whether during or in the aftermath of conflict, is how to reconcile political participation with their ideological rejection of the legitimacy of the political system and their constitutive calls to dramatically restructure the political order (Skocpol 1979).

This article examines the interactions between ideology and political practices by analysing how sustained involvement in institutional politics has shaped both Hamas's and Hezbollah's branding, interpretation and reliance on their own constitutive ideological manifestos, with a focus on how political participation affected these groups' own claims vis-à-vis the state and the political system. These sophisticated armed-cum-political organizations share a complex sociopolitico-military identity and a strong and sustained record of political participation.

As such, they are useful case studies to 'bring ideology back into the study of post-conflict comparative politics' (Curtis and Sindre 2018). Indeed, there is a relative gap in the scholarly debate on the role and impact of ideology in shaping armed groups' broader behaviour. In part, this stems from the fact that a significant portion of the post-Cold War literature on armed political movements has tended to either downplay the role of ideology or analyse it in mostly instrumental terms (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Mampilly 2011). A second shortcoming in the literature is that the analysis of the interaction between 'rejectionist' ideological beliefs and political practices has often been analysed in a 'linear' way, assuming political

participation as *prima facie* evidence of a desire to shift ‘away from exclusionary practices (of the sort that view all alternative perspectives as illegitimate and thus dangerous)’ (Berti 2013; Schwedler 2007: 60).

This article contributes to the existing debate both by taking ideology seriously and by problematizing the ‘inclusion–moderation’ hypothesis (Schwedler 2007). First, ideology is assumed to be crucial to the understanding of most armed groups’ political grievances, claims and programmes (Van Engeland and Rudolph 2008). Ideology, as ‘a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing it’ (Downs 1967), is a key tool for an organization to both rationalize its existence, attract support and organize its actions (Curtis and Sindre 2018; Knight 2006; Sanín and Wood 2014; Sartori 1969). At its core, ideology is both a communication device and a legitimacy-building tool. Moreover, ideology and non-material incentives play a substantial part in recruitment and mobilization, as well as in creating a powerful informal constraint on behaviour, ensuring loyalty and minimizing deviant behaviour within members and supporters alike (Hira and Hira 2000). A coherent and comprehensive ideology does not only facilitate internal unity by increasing cohesion and stability; it also allows an organization to communicate effectively with its external environment, thus increasing its legitimacy and its competitive advantage with respect to other organizations.

The issue of whether religion-based ideological claims are inherently more resilient than politically or ethnically based ones, and of whether armed groups whose ideologies are rooted in religion are intrinsically less likely to adapt their ideology, has been much discussed by scholars of religion and political violence alike, with no universal agreement (Juergensmeyer 2000; Rapoport 1984). Nevertheless, a deep sense of righteousness derived from the belief that ‘God is on its side’ only strengthens an armed group’s sense of identity, its perception of duty, and its rejection of compromise, along with its refusal to comply with established social norms and boundaries that openly clash with the group’s religious beliefs. What is more, to wage armed struggle as a means to fulfil what the members of a group believe to be God’s will creates a dual dynamic: the act of violence aims to simultaneously change the sociopolitical situation *today* while also being a symbolic act, a way to communicate with God, to transcend reality, as well as to atone and purify oneself (Juergensmeyer 2000; Rapoport 1984).

It follows that sunk and transaction costs associated with drastically altering core ideological beliefs tend to be extremely high for armed groups in general, and for religion-based ones specifically (Berti and Heifetz Knobel 2015). For rebel opposition groups that built their wartime political identity around the inherent injustice and unsustainability of the status quo, the illegitimacy of the state and the political system, the need for a revolutionary restructuring of the state and the utility and legitimacy of armed struggle, the challenge of reconciling wartime ideology with the inevitable compromises required by political participation and electoral competition can be daunting. Without the proper discursive reframing and internal consensus-building processes, rebels-turned-politicians risk losing support from their core constituency, creating deep internal strife and, ultimately, compromising their identity and legitimacy (Berti and Heifetz Knobel 2015).

This is not to discard the notion that participation in institutional politics and electoral logics can, over time, impact an armed group's strategy and contribute to significant ideological repositioning. Shifts towards 'ideological moderation' can occur by socializing the armed group to the rules of the political game; by increasing chances for cooperation and alliances; by improving the level of accountability and responsiveness to its constituency; and by strengthening its interests in preserving the political system it was once bound to destroy (Finn 2000; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Yet, as this article details, these elements alone cannot suffice to affirm the existence of a deterministic and linear relation between political participation and renouncing previously held core radical beliefs. To the contrary, the analysis of Hezbollah's and Hamas's discursive reframing of their ideological beliefs on political participation reveal a complex process of accommodation of political expediency and ideological aspirations. In the process, governance practices and ideological beliefs are contested, reshaped and adapted over time.

## CASE STUDIES AND CONTEXT

Despite their distinct historical and political trajectories, ideologies and strategic evolutions, both Hamas and Hezbollah share important commonalities that make them especially salient cases to examine the complex interactions of political expediency and ideology over time.

First, both organizations are simultaneously armed groups, social movements, political parties and providers of governance, holding a hybrid and multilayered status. Second, both groups have a relatively long historical record of political participation both in grassroots and institutional politics; they have both competed in multiple elections and have been involved in the provision of governance both at the subnational and national level.

In the case of Hamas, the group began competing in 'nonpolitical popular elections' (Zahhar and Hijazi 1995) as early as the late 1980s, taking part in electoral contests in universities, workplaces and trade unions. Over a decade later, in 2004, Hamas decided to take part in Palestinian municipal and national elections as a political party, following Yasser Arafat's death. Shortly afterwards, in the aftermath of its victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, the deterioration of an internal rift within the Palestinian political system led to a *de facto* split of the Palestinian arena between the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority-ruled West Bank. As a result, Hamas fast rose to become the *de facto* governor of Gaza. Similarly for Hezbollah, the group first began operating as a militia in the context of the Lebanese civil war; but it evolved into a complex armed, social and political movement shortly afterwards, in the process becoming a key provider of sociopolitical goods and services to the Lebanese-Shiite community within Lebanon (Hamzeh 2004). The end of the civil war facilitated Hezbollah's decision to establish itself as a political party and compete in both municipal and national elections in Lebanon. Since 1992, Hezbollah has taken part in all Lebanese elections, cementing its dual status as mainstream political party and extra-institutional armed group.

In addition, despite operating under different opportunity structures, both organizations question the binary conflict/post-conflict framework by being situated in a liminal 'no war, no peace' space, both involved in an open-ended, cyclical conflict with Israel and, in the case of Hezbollah, in the ongoing Syrian civil war (Berti 2016; Mac Ginty 2006).

Finally, both Hamas's and Hezbollah's political discourse and overall ideological framework are grounded in religious claims, albeit of different natures, and clearly articulated in a series of constitutive documents. Both groups have well-developed official constitutive manifestos that reflect the group's 'public theology' and political discourse (Curtis and Sindre 2018).<sup>1</sup> Over the past decades, both

organizations have also publicly commented and analysed their own ideological manifestos, offering a direct window onto their own political analysis and evolution.

To track significant shifts in the overall political discourse and ideological positioning of these groups, this article relies on the groups' own official manifestos and on their subsequent public exegesis of these texts as well as on the succeeding political documents that either replaced, complemented or amended the original foundational manifestos.<sup>2</sup>

#### HAMAS AND HEZBOLLAH: THE EVOLUTION OF THE IDEOLOGICAL 'MANIFESTOS'

Officially established during the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987 to serve as the military wing of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas's first coherent expression of its ideology dates back to 1988 and to the publication of the Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement. Through this document, Hamas self-identified as the Islamic and nationalist Palestinian resistance. Concretely, this means that the group built its political claims on the basis of a religious discourse revolving around the group's Sunni Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood affiliation, as well as a nationalist one, highlighting the importance of nationalism and *wataniyya* (patriotism/nationalism) in shaping the Palestinian struggle. The group's stated objective in the Charter is resistance, *muqawama*, as a comprehensive framework of action, articulating the 'liberation of Palestine', chiefly through armed struggle, as the group's main end-goal. In a similarly maximalist position, the Charter also rejects the possibility of accepting a negotiated settlement or a political compromise to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Knudsen 2005; Maqdsi 1993). In parallel to making claims about the illegitimacy of the existing political order, the Charter also addresses Hamas's state-building vision. On this issue, Hamas identifies the Islamization of society through social work and education and the establishment of a system of government based on the principles of Sharia law as the group's main political aspirations within the Palestinian political arena (Gunning 2008; Maqdsi 1993).

Over the following three decades, Hamas has repeatedly wrestled with reconciling the principles expressed in its Charter with its actual

political behaviour. For example, to obviate the Charter's clear opposition to any dealings or agreements with Israel, Hamas developed a parallel political discourse based on concepts such as the *de facto*, rather than the *de jure*, recognition of Israel and the possibility of pausing the struggle with Israel and reaching both short- and long-term ceasefires and truces (*hudna*), thus allowing the group to enter into ceasefire agreements with Israel without having to retract its Charter commitments (Mishal and Sela 2000). Without renouncing or denying its validity, Hamas's involvement in politics also led to the group's almost systematic downplaying of its Charter when promoting its political vision to the international community, especially in the aftermath of its 2006 participation in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections and its 2007 takeover of Gaza. For example, speaking about the Charter in a 2007 op-ed written for the *Los Angeles Times*, Mousa Abu Marzook, then Hamas deputy head of the Political Bureau, famously wrote, 'As for the 1988 charter, if every state or movement were to be judged solely by its foundational, revolutionary documents or the ideas of its progenitors, there would be a good deal to answer for on all sides' (Marzook 2007). In a similar fashion, former head of the Political Bureau Khaled Meshal argued in a 2009 *New York Times* interview that:

The most important thing is what Hamas is doing and the policies it is adopting today. The world must deal with what Hamas is practicing today. Hamas has accepted the national reconciliation document. It has accepted a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders including East Jerusalem, dismantling settlements, and the right of return based on a long term truce. Hamas has represented a clear political program through a unity government. This is Hamas's program regardless of the historic documents. Hamas has offered a vision. Therefore, it's not logical for the international community to get stuck on sentences written 20 years ago. It's not logical for the international community to judge Hamas based on these sentences and stay silent when Israel destroys and kills our people. (Meshal 2009)

And after decades of simultaneously endorsing and distancing itself from its constitutive document, in 2017, the group published an updated ideological manifesto. Whilst preserving a core continuity with the 1988 Charter, the 2017 ideological platform reflected a significant increase in the group's political sophistication, especially in relation to its state-building and governance aspirations. The updated text also relied on constructive vagueness (Yaghi 2006) to smooth some of the ideological hard edges of the original text. For example, the 2017 document reiterates the need to pursue the full liberation of Palestine while also adding:

without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus. (*Middle East Eye* 2017)

Hezbollah has a similarly dynamic relationship with its core ideological document: the 1985 Open Letter (in Alagha 2011). Published in 1985 – in the midst of both the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli intervention in the country – the Open Letter offers a similarly Manichaean worldview and exclusionary language as Hamas's Charter. The Open Letter was published shortly after Hezbollah's official establishment in 1982, when the group emerged as an umbrella organization to coordinate Khomeini-inspired Shia militants' campaigns against the Israeli Defence Forces (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002). The Open Letter is grounded in Hezbollah's religious belief system, shaped in turn by Shiite Islam, by an undercurrent of Shiite religious and political revivalism and by the adoption of the revolutionary ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini (Saouli 2014). Like the Charter, the Open Letter clarifies Hezbollah's position in respect of both its political and military agenda. Regarding the latter, the document maintains the need for armed struggle, *jihad*, to fight against all foreign presence and interference in Lebanon, while asserting the necessity of armed resistance against the Israeli presence in Lebanon and in support of the Palestinian struggle in general (Alagha 2011). When it comes to domestic politics, the Open Letter focused on the need to establish an Islamic state modelled after the Islamic Republic of Iran and rejected the notion of political participation in the Lebanese political system, which the group described as inherently corrupt and illegitimate (Alagha 2011; Norton 2007). Linking all political, military and social threads in Hezbollah's worldview emerging from the Open Letter is the notion of resistance as a comprehensive framework of action and the group's self-identified role as a vanguard in the struggle between the oppressed (*mustad'afoun*) and the oppressor (*mustakbiroun*) (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002).

In the decades since its original publication, Hezbollah's Open Letter has continued to serve as the group's ideological framework, but with some interesting caveats. Indeed, the group's gradual transition to becoming a political party led Hezbollah to downplay systematically the Open Letter's statements in respect of the need to



establish an Islamic state in Lebanon. Specifically, the group relied on the letter's 'call for the implementation of the Islamic system based on a direct and free choice of the people, and not through forceful imposition as may be assumed by some' (Alagha 2011) and on the importance of the principle of non-compulsion (that is, no one should be forcibly converted to Islam) (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002) to begin rephrasing the call for an Islamic state as an aspirational, rather than programmatic, goal (Harb and Leenders 2005). Eventually, the process of political reframing led Hezbollah to publish, in November 2009, 'The Political Document (Manifesto) of Hezbollah' (in Alagha 2011), a revised ideological platform characterized by significant continuity with the 1985 military agenda and with the group's characterization of Israel and of its armed resistance. Just as significantly, the 2009 platform provided a revised political discourse in respect of Hezbollah's vision for Lebanon – for example by omitting any reference to the project of establishing an Islamic state and by openly self-identifying as part of the Lebanese political system (in Alagha 2011).

A cursory examination of both Hamas's and Hezbollah's relations with their constitutive ideological platforms reveals a tension between both groups' need for ideological continuity and coherence and the necessity of responding to external changes in their broader socio-political milieu. This tension is especially present when analysing both organizations' trajectories when it comes to justifying political participation and governance.

#### IDEOLOGY AND ADAPTATION: REFRAMING THE LEGITIMACY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE STATE

A key challenge many rebel opposition groups face in entering institutional politics, whether during or in the aftermath of conflict, is how to reconcile political participation with their ideological rejection of the legitimacy of the political system and their constitutive calls for a dramatic restructuring of the political order.

In its 1988 Charter (Maqdsi 1993), Hamas explicitly rejected the possibility of coming to terms with the status quo and objected to any type of interim political arrangement to solve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In parallel, the group remained vague, at best, about its own

programmatic platform as a political movement and about how it intended to exercise governance when in power.

Based on these parameters, the group built its political identity in the 1990s around its political and armed opposition to the peace process that had emerged between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), quickly rising as the leader of the 'rejectionist camp' and as the main political and ideological challenger to the PLO and Fatah (Berti 2013). In this context, Hamas's political activities and its military struggle served mutually reinforcing purposes, challenging and undermining the main political competitor, Fatah, while waging war against Israel, and asserting Hamas's distinctive ideological and political orientation.

Yet the Oslo Accords and the subsequent creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 – a hybrid quasi-sovereign political entity intended as the first step towards viable Palestinian statehood – completely changed the political and security context, as Hamas's political agenda became increasingly unpopular within Palestine and as its ideological rigidity came to be seen as a liability, rather than an asset. Since the creation of the PA, in fact, Palestinian public opinion, hopeful that the peace process would succeed, strongly aligned with Fatah, with only 15 per cent of Palestinians supporting Islamist groups by mid-1998 (Shikaki 1998). Similarly, by 1996 support for armed struggle had hit an all-time low, with only approximately 20 per cent of Palestinians expressing support for political violence (Matesan 2012).

Facing the prospect of decline pushed Hamas to think seriously about investing in becoming an institutionalized political party and in participating in the first Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for 1996 as a way to restore popularity and legitimacy. However, the possibility of pursuing political participation generated strong intra-organizational tensions and brought the question of harmonizing ideology and pragmatism to the forefront of the organization's strategic debate. On the one hand, Hamas's political leaders in Gaza – where Hamas was the strongest in terms of legitimacy and presence on the ground – asserted that the organization needed to take part in the electoral race (Klein 2009; Kristianasen 1999). The Gaza political leadership, amongst them rising political leader Ismail Haniyeh, went as far as officially registering themselves as candidates (they all but one later retracted their candidacies) (Gunning 2008). On the other hand, Hamas's military wing, the Qassam Brigades, continued to

place emphasis on carrying out violent operations against Israel, without becoming directly involved in the question of advancing political participation. Diaspora-based leaders were at the same time extremely critical of entering institutional politics and against any type of cooperation with the PA: estranged from daily life in Palestine, they saw compromise through far more critical and ideological eyes, which was also in line with the sentiments of many Palestinians living in the Diaspora as well as their host governments, which were overall more critical of the Oslo Accords (Kurz and Nahman 1997).

The competing interests present within Hamas – political power for the Gaza leaders, military status for the Qassam Brigades, and ideological ‘purity’ along with preservation of control and legitimacy for the Political Bureau – led to considerable internal conflict (Kurz and Nahman 1997). Ultimately, a combination of ideological commitment and pragmatic considerations led the group to decide to refrain from competing in elections (Kristianasen 1999). Ideologically, Hamas decided that the group could not participate in the legislative elections as this would have been seen as tantamount to recognizing the Oslo process and retracting its Charter-based commitment to rejecting negotiations and political compromises (Mishal and Sela 2000). But the decision was not grounded on ideology alone: the group also asserted that taking part in the legislative elections was politically problematic and likely to be counter-productive as Fatah and its political leader, Yasser Arafat, de facto controlled the Palestinian political system. Arafat maintained a strong grip on Palestinian politics, leaving Hamas with little hope that winning seats in the parliament would mean increasing the group’s actual decision-making power (Mishal and Sela 2000).

Even though the group officially shied away from taking part in the 1996 elections, the debate on the legitimacy of political participation had a long-term impact on the group, leading Hamas to invest more resources in the provision of social and political goods and in grassroots politics as a deliberate strategy to deal with the group’s perceived loss of popularity and legitimacy (Roy 2000, 2011). Eventually, these investments in politics would lay the groundwork for Hamas’s later decision to participate in the 2004–5 municipal elections, as well as in the 2006 legislative contest.

This strategic choice was influenced by a number of factors, including the demise of the Oslo process, the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004 and the subsequent ‘opening’ of the political arena, and the

general decline in the levels of public support for armed struggle (Gunning 2008). What is more, the rising weakness and internal conflict plaguing Fatah (Shikaki 2002), combined with the crisis of governance of the PA, as well as with Hamas's regained popularity in the wake of the second Intifada and due to Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, all pushed the organization towards attempting to translate its grassroots popularity into political support. Finally, the general level of weariness of the group's military wing as a result of the intense and prolonged military confrontation with Israel made sure that the decision to invest in institutional politics was reached without creating a deep internal crisis (International Crisis Group 2006). Just as interesting is to observe how little ideological considerations shaped the 2004–6 debate; Hamas de facto sidelined its constitutive objection to political participation in the system created by the Oslo Accords by stating that that system had been destroyed by the second Intifada, whilst saying very little about the legitimacy of taking part in secular elections (Berti 2013; Herzog 2006).

Hamas subsequently devoted substantial organizational resources to planning and carrying out its electoral campaign, devising a political platform focused on social change, anti-corruption and transparency, as well as on development and poverty eradication (Gunning 2008; Klein 2007; Løvlie 2013; Palestinian Information Centre 2005). In choosing these socioeconomic and social justice issues as the focus of its electoral platform, Hamas yet again drew on ideology and pragmatism. From a practical perspective, the group relied on its record as a social services provider as a key tool to build public and political legitimacy (Palestinian Information Centre 2005; Szekely 2015). At the same time, Hamas's commitment to social work over the previous decades also represented a testament to the group's adherence to its ideological aspiration to create an Islamic society based on mutual solidarity. Indeed, the 1988 Charter itself underlined the importance of charity, education and social work and asserted their crucial role: 'Social solidarity consists of extending help to all the needy, both materially and morally, or assisting in the execution of certain actions. It is incumbent upon the members of the Hamas to look after the interests of the masses the way they would look after their own interests' (Maqdsi 1993).

The 2005–6 political campaign also gave Hamas a chance to explain how the group squared its investment in politics with its

Charter-based commitment to focus on armed struggle: 'Resistance is Hamas' main focus, and we call for its continuation, but we also hope to become more involved in Palestinian society and provide services to the Palestinian people, hence our participation in these elections', 'It is our duty to progress, to move forward, to invest in infrastructure, and to invest in change and face challenges' (Sukhtian 2005). Importantly, this message, which the group has continued to reiterate in the following decade, successfully allowed Hamas to harmonize its political practices with its ideological commitments. By branding the decision to participate in politics as complementary, not alternative, to armed struggle and by stressing that the prioritization of politics was the result of a strategic decision rather than an ideological one, the group was able to ensure both internal cohesion and ideological continuity.

Hence, following over a decade of internal political deliberations, Hamas's entry into politics circumvented the Charter-based ideological refusal to take part in a political system the group saw as 'illegitimate' while still stressing a continuity of objectives and principles. At the same time, sustained involvement in Palestinian politics contributed to the sharpening of the group's political visions, resulting in the 2017 adapted manifesto being able to provide far more substance than its 1988 predecessor when it came to explaining Hamas's view of political participation. In 2017, the organization indeed affirmed it was committed to a sovereign Palestinian state, that it was in favour of 'pluralism, democracy, national partnership, acceptance of the other and the adoption of dialogue' and that it aspired to build 'Palestinian national institutions on sound democratic principles, foremost among them are free and fair elections' (*Middle East Eye* 2017). Just as important as filling the gaps left in 1988, the 2017 document also downplays some of the claims made in the 1988 Charter, including on the need for a state ruled under Sharia law. In 2017 Hamas remains far more vague on this issue, limiting itself to asserting that 'Islam – for Hamas – provides a comprehensive way of life and an order that is fit for purpose at all times and in all places' (*Middle East Eye* 2017).

In tandem with justifying political participation, Hamas's de facto governance and sustained political participation forced the group to tackle the challenge of balancing ideologically imposed political limitations with political expediency time and time again. For example, the aspect of governance where tensions between Hamas as a resistance organization and Hamas as a government emerged with

striking clarity has undoubtedly been the ‘foreign policy’ portfolio and specifically its relations with Israel. On the one hand, being in government put Hamas in a place where it needed to have better relations with both Israel and the international community. On the other hand, drifting away too substantially from its ideological platform of ‘resistance’ risked alienating its own militants, creating an internal rift, thus losing its credibility. A similar dilemma for the group has pertained to the regulation of armed struggle in the aftermath of assuming control of Gaza. A zero-tolerance posture in respect of attacks against Israel would strengthen the notion – advanced by Hamas’s detractors – that the group has given up on its *jihad* against Israel, while also risking creating a serious ideological rift between the government, the military wing and the group’s external leadership (Berti 2010). Yet, allowing attacks to occur in an unrestrained fashion represented an equally unappealing option to the Hamas government as this would weaken Hamas’s position as the effective ruler while also carrying the risk of leading to Israeli retaliation. As such the group’s leadership has been trying to balance between governance and ‘resistance’ both at the rhetoric level, through constructive vagueness, and at the practical level, alternating between crackdowns on unsanctioned attacks and periods where such operations are allowed to occur.

Hezbollah’s 1985 Open Letter (Alagha 2011) similarly represented an inherent obstacle to the group’s sustained participation in institutional politics. The document indeed rejected the status quo, questioned the legitimacy of the state and the political system, and explicitly argued against becoming involved in politics. Whereas in the midst of the bloody Lebanese civil war the cost of rejecting political participation was relatively low, the situation changed with the ratification of the Taif Agreement (1989) and the end of the 15-year conflict. With the end of the civil war, political participation began to look more appealing for Hezbollah: not only were the state and the political system once again the centre of decision-making in Lebanon, but entering politics also represented a chance to convert the grassroots support acquired through Hezbollah’s military performance and social services provision into political influence (Berti 2011). Conversely, the practical risks related to political involvement were relatively low; Hezbollah were to enter politics in a friendly political system shaped by Syria’s ‘tutelage’ of Lebanon; a setting where the group could consider competing in elections without

having to relinquish its military apparatus. Therefore, with political expediency clashing with the Charter-based commitment to remain an anti-systemic actor and refrain from being involved in institutional politics, Hezbollah embraced a twin process of internal consensus building and ideological reframing to make political participation possible.

With regard to the former, Hezbollah embraced political participation through a process of internal debate and consensus building. In the aftermath of the Taif Agreement, the organization was split over the question of political involvement, with the first secretary general of the organization, Subhi al-Tufayli, objecting to politics on ideological grounds and arguing political involvement would lead the group to lose focus and dilute its resistance agenda (Norton 2007). On the other side of the debate, al-Sayyed Abbas al-Moussawi, who would later become Hezbollah's second secretary general in 1991, argued that political participation would strengthen, rather than weaken, Hezbollah's resistance (Qassem 2005). To obtain the necessary internal buy-in to support political participation, Moussawi enlisted credible ideological sources of support, both in Iran and in Lebanon. In addition, he relied on the recommendations made by an ad hoc 12-member committee established to consider the issue of electoral participation. With the committee supporting electoral participation, and with the committee's recommendations endorsed by Iran's Supreme Leader (Qassem 2005), Hezbollah was able to move towards institutional politics whilst minimizing the chances of internal conflict.

In addition to building internal consensus, joining politics also required a process of ideological reframing to accommodate the Charter's rejection of the political system with the group's de facto acceptance of it through direct involvement in elections. Hezbollah had to accommodate political participation with its previous rejection of the political system as well as with its opposition to the Taif Agreement. Indeed, the group had rejected Taif, protesting that it 'was transformed into the country's Constitution, and this we cannot accept, especially because it enshrines sectarianism; sectarianism was merely a custom in the past, but after Taif it became enshrined in the constitution' (Noe 2007). To enter institutional politics, Hezbollah chose not to retract directly the claims made in the Open Letter; rather the group stressed, 'Participation in parliamentary elections is an expression of sharing in an existing political structure, Parliament

being one of the regime's pillars. It does not, however, represent a commitment to preserving the structure as it is, or require defence of the system's deficiencies and blemishes' (Qassem 2005). Building on this basis, the group shifted from its initial rejection of the Lebanese political system to a more narrowly defined objection to the role of sectarianism in shaping Lebanese politics, over time championing the cause of administrative decentralization and the need to move from a sectarian to a proportional electoral system (Alagha 2011). This political agenda was then clearly integrated into Hezbollah's overall ideological platform in the 2009 Manifesto. In that document Hezbollah asserted: 'The main problem in the Lebanese political system which prevents its reform, development and constant updating is political sectarianism' (Alagha 2011).

In parallel to shifting from a revolutionary to a reformist agenda in respect of the political system, Hezbollah also had to soften some of the messages of the Charter to become a mainstream political party, including the emphasis on the group's transnational identity and Iranian connections and its aspiration to build an Islamic state in Lebanon – both of which hindered the ability of the group to be seen as a genuine Lebanese political actor. In response, Hezbollah embarked on a campaign to stress its Arab and Lebanese identity while downplaying its relations with Iran (see Alagha 2011). Even more importantly, in the 1990s, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah invested in stressing that 'we never said we want to build an Islamic identity through oppression and compulsion at any level[;] ... we should not build an Islamic government on oppression and coercion' (Noe 2007). Similarly, Hezbollah also downplayed the Open Letter's antagonist statements against other confessional groups in Lebanon, and especially towards Maronite Christians; instead it embarked on a political strategy aimed at developing ad hoc cross-sectarian electoral alliances to maximize its power (Harik 2006). This shift away from the exclusionary language of the Open Letter became even more explicit in the 2009 Manifesto, where Hezbollah not only omitted any reference to its Islamic state aspirations but it also called for the creation of a 'political system that truly represents the will of the people and their aspirations for justice, freedom, security, stability, well-being, and dignity' (Alagha 2011).

But, much like in the case of Hamas, sustained participation in the political system did not just lead Hezbollah to reframe its earlier ideological rejection of the political system and to downplay its previous anti-



systemic and revolutionary ethos (Alagha 2006; El Hussein 2010; Khatib 2011). Indeed, political participation also pushed the group to develop its unique political branding and platform further. And here ideological continuity and commitment proved to be an asset, rather than a liability. Like Hamas, Hezbollah invested in developing a political platform centred around social welfare and social justice as well as in the promotion of economic and social development programmes. In other words, to build its unique political identity, Hezbollah drew on its strong performance in providing social services, relying on it to consolidate political legitimacy and support, chiefly from the Lebanese Shiite community (Cammett 2014; Flanigan 2008; Harik 2006; Khashan and Mousawi 2007). It also stressed the strong ideological link between its political commitment to social solidarity and its religious-cum-political ethos of fighting oppression and siding with the world's oppressed (Hamzeh 2000). Importantly, the political and social identity centred on justice and oppression was not established in contradiction to the group's militant ethos, but rather with armed struggle, social justice and political opposition all constructed as different aspects of a broader 'duty of resistance' – seen as an all-comprehensive call to action.

Thus, through a complex process of ideological reframing and through the construction of a strong political identity, Hezbollah succeeded in entering institutional politics and sustaining its political participation over time. Indeed, since 1992, the group consistently competed in Lebanese parliamentary (1996, 2000, 2005, 2009 and 2018) as well as municipal (1998, 2004, 2010 and 2016) elections, becoming in the process a fixture of the Lebanese political landscape (Wiegand 2009).

At the same time, as in the case of Hamas, the challenge of balancing ideologically imposed political limitations with political expediency has continued to shape Hezbollah's political choices and governance practices in the aftermath of its initial decision to take part in the political system. Specifically, the organization has time and time again wrestled with the question of preserving a strong and autonomous resistance ethos whilst remaining an insider institutional actor. Practically, for years Hezbollah struck that balance by participating in the political system but refusing to be part of the executive apparatus and by preserving a 'resistance party' status. For example, in the aftermath of the 1992 elections, Hezbollah was the only Lebanese party that refused to join the executive cabinet and to award the new government of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri a vote of confidence (Hamzeh 2004). To stress this desire to remain an opposition party as well

as a resistance, counter-cultural movement, Secretary General Nasrallah explained Hezbollah's post-1992 political identity by stating, 'we were, and will always be, the party of the resistance that [operates] from Lebanon. ... Our participation in the elections ... do[es] not alter the fact that we are a resistance party; we shall, in fact, work to turn the whole of Lebanon into a country of resistance, and the state into a state of resistance' (Noe 2007). The ideological commitment to remaining an insider-outsider actor in Lebanese politics was only challenged when, in 2005, the end of the Syrian 'tutelage' of Lebanon and the relative opening of the political system following the 'Independence Intifada' threatened Hezbollah's privileged political status. In response, Hezbollah had to further weaken its status as an 'outsider-opposition party' by agreeing to join the executive cabinet and assume ministerial posts within the Lebanese political system, a position it has maintained ever since (Alagha 2005).

In sum, harmonizing ideology and behaviour in relation to the question of political participation represented a complex and lengthy process for both Hamas and Hezbollah, resulting in their actively taking part in the political system whilst preserving an at times ambivalent posture in respect of its legitimacy (or, as once put by Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party MP Gregory Campbell when describing Sinn Féin's relationship with its post-peace settlement political role, 'to be trying to deny the existence of the country in which it held office'). Similarly, in the development of their political identity and governance practices, the groups continuously engage in a reiterative discursive reframing process that seeks to accommodate political expediency and ideological aspirations. In the process, governance practices and ideological beliefs are contested and reshaped and adapted over time.

## CONCLUSION

The question of how ideological beliefs shape armed groups' trajectories with regard to political participation and governance practices is a complex, elusive and generally under-explored question in the scholarly literature. Far from being purely instrumental and thus inconsequential to shaping strategy, ideology inevitably influences how armed groups relate to the state and the political system as well as how they conceptualize their political role.

This article examines Hezbollah's and Hamas's complex relationship with their respective ideological constitutive documents, focusing on the

question of how to accommodate political participation with their previous ideological rejection of the legitimacy of the political system. What emerges from the analysis is a nuanced picture. Both groups' relations with their constitutive ideological platforms reveal a tension between the need for ideological continuity and coherence and the necessity to respond to external changes to their broader sociopolitical milieu. This results in a twin process of developing a political discourse that reframes core ideological beliefs and, without rejecting them, seeks to reinterpret them in a way that allows them to maximize political expediency. Some of the discursive reframing processes both groups had to undertake to assume a role as a political party involve shifting from rejecting to accepting the political system as a basis for political participation and from denying the possibility of political compromise to de facto condoning it. In the process, both organizations had to rethink and sharpen their state-building visions and aspirations. Just as importantly, both organizations had to invest in a process of internal debate and discussion to build internal consensus for these ideological-political changes.

At the same time, ideology should not be regarded only as a constraint on behaviour or an obstacle to political participation. Indeed, for both Hamas and Hezbollah, ideology – and specifically their religious-political commitment to the principles of social work and solidarity – have also served as key tools in building a self-standing political identity that has allowed the groups to emerge as political parties.

What an examination of these case studies reveals is a dynamic and reciprocal relation between political involvement and ideological commitments, with ideas and practices influencing and shaping each other in what is essentially a continually evolving process.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Public theology' can be defined as 'the systematic ways people relate their faith to public issues under the guidance of religious authorities' (Sandal 2012: 67).

<sup>2</sup> The author's own understanding of both groups draws on years of fieldwork.

## REFERENCES

- Alagha, J. (2005), 'Hizballah After the Syrian Withdrawal', *Middle East Report*, 237(Winter): 34–9.

- Alagha, J. (2006), *The Shifts in Hezbollah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program* (Leiden: Amsterdam University Press).
- Alagha, J. (2011) (ed.), *Hezbollah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto* (Amsterdam: Pallas Publications).
- Allison, M. (2006), 'The Transition from Armed Opposition to Electoral Opposition in Central America', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48(4): 137–62.
- Arjona, A. (2014), 'Wartime Institutions: A Research Agenda', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58(8): 1360–89.
- Arjona, A., Mampilly, Z. and Kasfir, N. (2016), *Rebel Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Berti, B. (2010), 'Salafist-Jihadist Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat', *Combating Terrorism Center (CTS) Sentinel*, United States Military Academy at West Point, 3 May. <https://ctc.usma.edu/salafi-jihadi-activism-in-gaza-mapping-the-threat>.
- Berti, B. (2011), 'Armed Groups as Political Parties and Their Role in Electoral Politics: The Case of Hezbollah', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34(12): 942–62.
- Berti, B. (2013), *Armed Political Organizations: From Conflict to Integration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Berti, B. (2016), 'Rebel Politics and the State: Between Conflict and Post-Conflict, Resistance and Co-Existence', *Civil Wars*, 18(2): 118–36.
- Berti, B. and Heifetz Knobel, A. (2015), 'Reframing War to Make Peace in Northern Ireland: IRA Internal Consensus-Building for Peace and Disarmament', *International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Negotiation*, 3(1), [www.elevenjournals.com/tijdschrift/ijcer/2015/1/IJ\\_CER\\_2211-9965\\_2015\\_003\\_001\\_003](http://www.elevenjournals.com/tijdschrift/ijcer/2015/1/IJ_CER_2211-9965_2015_003_001_003).
- Börzel, T. and Risse, T. (2010), 'Governance Without a State: Can it Work?', *Regulation and Governance*, 4: 113–34.
- Cammett, M. (2014), *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Collier, P. and Hoeffler, A. (2004) 'Greed and Grievance in Civil War', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56: 563–95.
- Curtis, D. and Sindre, G. (2018), 'Former Armed Movements, Ideology and State Transformation – Introduction to Special Issue', *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics*, 54 (in this issue).
- Downs, A. (1967), *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown).
- El Hussein, R. (2010), 'Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria', *Third World Quarterly*, 31(5): 803–15.
- Finn, J. (2000), 'Electoral Regimes and the Proscription of Anti-Democratic Parties', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 12(3): 51–77.
- Flanigan, S.T. (2008), 'Nonprofit Service Provision by Insurgent Organizations: The Cases of Hezbollah and the Tamil Tigers', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31(6): 499–519.
- Gunning, J. (2008), *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Hamzeh, A. (2004), *In the Path of Hezbollah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press).
- Hamzeh, N. (2000), 'Lebanon's Islamist and Local Politics: A New Reality', *Third World Quarterly*, 21(5): 739–59.

- Harb, M. and Leenders, R. (2005), 'Know Thy Enemy: Hizbullah "Terrorism" and the Politics of Perception', *Third World Quarterly*, 6(1): 173–97.
- Harik, J.P. (2006), *Hizballah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* (London: I.B. Tauris).
- Herzog, M. (2006), 'Can Hamas Be Tamed?', *Foreign Affairs* (March/April), www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2006-03-01/can-hamas-be-tamed.
- Hira, A. and Hira, R. (2000), 'The New Institutionalism: Contradictory Notions of Change', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 59(2): 267–82.
- Holmqvist, C. (2005), 'Engaging Armed Non-State Actors in Post-Conflict Settings', in A. Bryden and H. Hänggi (eds), *Security Governance in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)): 45–68.
- International Crisis Group (2006), 'Enter Hamas: The Challenge of Political Integration', *International Crisis Group Middle East Report* 49, 18 January (Amman/Brussels: International Crisis Group).
- Ishiyama, J. and Batta, A. (2011), 'Swords into Plowshares: The Organizational Transformation of Rebel Groups into Political Parties', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 44(4): 369–79.
- Juergensmeyer, M. (2000), *Terror in the Mind of God* (Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- Khashan, H. and Mousawi, I. (2007), 'Hizbullah's Jihad Concept', *Journal of Religion and Society*, 9: 1–19.
- Khatib, L. (2011), 'Hizbullah's Political Strategy', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 53(2): 61–76.
- Klein, M. (2007), 'Hamas in Power', *Middle East Journal*, 61(3): 442–59.
- Klein, M. (2009), 'Against the Consensus: Oppositionist Voices in Hamas', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 45(6): 881–92.
- Knight, K. (2006), 'Transformations of the Concept of Ideology in the Twentieth Century', *American Political Science Review*, 100: 619–26.
- Kristianasen, W. (1999), 'Challenge and Counterchallenge: Hamas's Response to Oslo', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 28(3): 19–36.
- Kurz, A. and Nahman, T. (1997), 'Hamas: Radical Islam in a National Struggle', Memorandum No. 48 (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University).
- Knudsen, A. (2005), 'Crescent and Sword: The Hamas Enigma', *Third World Quarterly*, 26(8): 1373–88.
- Løvlie, F. (2013), 'Explaining Hamas's Changing Electoral Strategy, 1996–2006', *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics*, 48(4): 570–93.
- Mac Ginty, R. (2006), *No War, No Peace: The Rejuvenation of Stalled Peace Processes and Peace Accords* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Mampilly, Z. (2011), *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Manning, C. (2007), 'Party-Building on the Heels of War: El Salvador, Bosnia, Kosovo and Mozambique', *Democratization*, 14(2): 253–72.
- Maqdsi, M. (1993), 'Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 22(4): 122–34.

- Marzook, M.A. (2007), ' Hamas' Stand', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 July.
- Matesan, I.E. (2012), 'What Makes Negative Frames Resonant? Hamas and the Appeal of Opposition to the Peace Process', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24(5): 671–705.
- Meshal, K. (2009), 'Transcript: Interview with Khaled Meshal of Hamas', *New York Times*, 5 May.
- Middle East Eye* (2017), ' Hamas in 2017: The Document in Full', *Middle East Eye*, 1 May.
- Mishal, S. and Sela, A. (2000), *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Noe, N. (2007), 'Interview with Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah Al-Watan Al-Arab, September 11 1992', in N. Noe (ed.), *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah* (London: Verso): 88.
- Norton, R.A. (2007), *Hezbollah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- O'Donnell, G. and Schmitter, P. (1986), *Transitions for Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Palestinian Information Centre (2005), 'Political Platform of the Reform and Change Movement', Palestinian Information Centre, 14 January, available through LexisNexis.
- Petrusek, D. (2000), *Ends and Means: Human Rights Approaches to Armed Groups* (Verso: International Council on Human Rights Policy).
- Qassem, N. (2005), *Hizbullah: The Story from Within* (London: Saqi).
- Rapoport, D. (1984), 'Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions', *American Political Science Review*, 78(3): 658–77.
- Roy, S. (2000), 'The Transformation of Islamic NGOs in Palestine', *Middle East Report*, 214.
- Roy, S. (2011), *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Saad-Ghorayeb, A. (2002), *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press).
- Sandal, N.A. (2012), 'The Clash of Public Theologies? Rethinking the Concept of Religion in Global Politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 37(1): 66–83.
- Sanín, F.G. and Wood, E.J. (2014), 'Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond', *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(2): 213–26.
- Saouli, A. (2014), 'Intellectuals and Political Power in Social Movements: The Parallel Paths of Fadlallah and Hizbullah', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 41(1): 97–116.
- Sartori, G. (1969), 'Politics, Ideology, and Belief Systems', *American Political Science Review*, 63: 398–411.
- Schneckener, U. (2009), 'Spoilers or Governance Actors? Engaging Armed Non-State Groups in Areas of Limited Statehood', *Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood, New Modes of Governance, Working Paper Series 21* (Berlin: Research Center (SFB)), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.603.17&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.
- Schwedler, J. (2007), 'Democratization, Inclusion and the Moderation of Islamist Parties', *Development*, 50(1): 59–60.
- Shikaki, K. (1998), 'Peace Now or Hamas Later', *Foreign Affairs*, 77(7): 29–43.
- Shikaki, K. (2002), 'Palestinians Divided', *Foreign Affairs*, 83(1), [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/palestinian-authority/2002-01-01/palestinians-divided](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/palestinian-authority/2002-01-01/palestinians-divided).
- Skocpol, T. (1979), *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

- Sukhtian, L. (2005), ' Hamas Turns Focus to Political Campaign Ahead of Municipal Elections', interview with spokesman Sami Abu Zahra, Associated Press Worldstream, 25 January, available through LexisNexis.
- Szekely, O. (2015), 'Doing Well by Doing Good: Understanding Hamas's Social Services as Political Advertising', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38(4), 275–92.
- Taif Agreement (1989), The Taif Agreement (signed on 22 October and ratified on 4 November).
- Van Engeland, A. and Rudolph, A.M. (2008), *From Terrorism to Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate).
- Wiegand, K. (2009), 'Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32: 669–80.
- Yaghi, M. (2006), 'Abbas, Hamas, and the Referendum Trap', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/abbas-hamas-and-the-referendum-trap](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/abbas-hamas-and-the-referendum-trap).
- Zahhar, M. and Hijazi, H. (1995), 'Hamas: Waiting for Secular Nationalism to Self-Destruct. An Interview with Mahmud Zahhar', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 24(3): 82.