

# Questioning the Secular-Religious Cleavage in Palestinian Politics: Comparing Fatah and Hamas

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**Abstract:** Following the 2007 war between Fatah and Hamas, Palestinian politics appears to have followed the regional trend where the competition between secularism and Islamism is developing into a major political cleavage. Through comparisons of the two movements' ideologies, however, the article questions the relevance of this religious-secular cleavage to explaining Palestinian factional politics. Fatah — the traditional hegemon in Palestinian politics and previously staunchly secularist — has turned increasingly religious in response to the spread of Islamism. Hamas for its part has shed its overly religious rhetoric, absolutist territorial claims, and insistence on a violent solution to the Palestinian problem, in tandem with the deradicalization of the Palestinian population. In finding that both movements have moved toward the center of the political spectrum to maximize support, the article concludes that their rivalry is best understood as a competition for the median voter rather than as an indication of political polarization.

## INTRODUCTION

As elsewhere in the Middle East region, Islam has become an increasingly important characteristic of Palestinian politics in the last few decades, a development most prominently indicated by the rise of Hamas at the expense of Fatah (Shamir and Shikaki 2010, 138). The intense competition and subsequent fall-out between these two factions has had serious consequences both for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and for the now

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stalled peace process. While the range of purported explanations for the intra-Palestinian conflict is wide,<sup>1</sup> a popular and oft-cited reason is that the enmity between the two is the product of a secular-religious<sup>2</sup> cleavage in Palestinian politics (Lybarger 2007; Schanzer 2009). A superficial reading of the two factions' rhetoric and origins is often used to support this thesis. On the one hand, because Fatah emerged and matured during the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s as a leftist liberation movement dependent on Soviet sponsorship, its secularism is taken for granted. On the other, Hamas was established in 1987 by the Muslim Brotherhood as an Islamic resistance movement, and has been supported by the Islamist regime in Iran and the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah. Consequently, its religious credentials are rarely called into question.

Both factions have, however, developed and changed since their inception. This article will trace this development by focusing on and comparing their respective ideologies in order to investigate the relevance of a secular-religious cleavage to understanding Palestinian domestic politics. To this end, a brief background on Palestinian factional politics and nationalism, including two short sections outlining the role of secularism and religiosity, will first be provided. An analysis of how Fatah and Hamas frame their nationalistic goals with reference to ideology, secularism, and religion will follow. Supported by findings from the relevant literature and fieldwork on the West Bank and among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, the analysis demonstrates that the ideologies and stated positions of Fatah and Hamas have converged in recent years. Although the Constitution of Fatah officially promotes a secular Palestine and Hamas's Charter a religious one, both their rhetoric and their actions currently indicate otherwise. While interviewed Fatah members dismissed Hamas as a zealously religious party, Fatah itself has arguably turned increasingly religious in the last couple of decades. For their part, interviewed Hamas members seemed to pay little attention to their own supposed religiosity or Fatah's purported secularism, focusing instead on issues such as corruption and nepotism. In sum, the interviewed cadres from both factions were unable to demonstrate that their visions for Palestine differ much in terms of secularism and religion.

## **PALESTINIAN NATIONALISM – A BRIEF BACKGROUNDER**

As the political borders of the Middle East were redrawn following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, most of the new Arab entities were promised and

ultimately granted sovereignty as states by the colonial powers. These were therefore relatively free to imagine, formulate, and refine their respective identities and cultures, in effect constructing the nationalisms that — more or less successfully — bind them together today. Much of the history of Palestinian nationalism, however, runs contrary to the regional experience. Already from the early 1920s, the then embryonic Palestinian identity faced a nationalistic challenger in Zionism. The Palestinians were thus only one of two groups laying claim to the British Mandate of Palestine (Khalidi 2010, 193). While this competition with the Zionists worked as a unifying factor in the formulation and creation of a Palestinian identity, the early history of Palestinian nationalism was nevertheless hampered by clan-based rivalry, factionalism, and infighting (Sayigh 1997, 1–10).

The scope and focus of this article does not allow for a fair treatment of this contested historical period and its consequences for Palestinian nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say that while their Arab brethren got their states and could initiate state-driven nation-building projects, the Palestinians did not and could not. Instead, it was the Zionists who on May 14, 1948 declared the State of Israel in parts of the British Mandate of Palestine, prompting the outbreak of the First Arab-Israeli War.<sup>4</sup> Israel eventually emerged victorious from the war against the Arab states, but only after displacing some 700,000 Palestinians, most of whom fled to the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, or to one of the surrounding Arab states (Morris 2004, 603–604).

The successful establishment of the State of Israel in much of the territory of the Mandate of Palestine and the ensuing Palestinian exodus became and remain crucial markers of Palestinian identity and nationalism. As such, the conflict with Israel constitutes a major uniting force for Palestinians, largely superseding opposing loyalties and potential identity conflicts between different socioeconomic classes, families, clans, religious groups, ideologies, and cultural traditions (Khalidi 2010, 194). The resistance against the Zionists has also worked to counteract the diffusion of an Arab identity among Palestinian refugees, though pan-Arabism has to some extent influenced the Palestinians' fight for their homeland. In short, however, the exclusiveness of Palestinian nationalism — i.e., who is and who is not a Palestinian and where the territory of Palestine is — has been largely uncontested since the establishment of Israel: the territory of Palestine is what used to be the British Mandate of Palestine, and all who lived there prior to the influx of the Zionists are Palestinians.

As the major markers of Palestinian identity are their exile, the suffering inflicted upon them, and the unresolved conflict with Israel (Sayigh 1997, 10, 46), it stands to reason that any Palestinian national movement hoping to gain legitimacy must work for the liberation of Palestine, or at least claim to do so. As a consequence, how to liberate Palestine, how much of Palestine to liberate, and who is to liberate Palestine have been issues of contestation between Palestinian liberation movements — arguably much more so than what kind of ideology should eventually prevail. In brief, the who question divided Palestinians between those favoring an Arab-led solution and those advocating a Palestinian solution (Baumgarten 2005); the how much question became a contentious issue in 1974, when Fatah led the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to in effect postpone the liberation of historical Palestine to some distant future while accepting coexistence with Israel as an interim solution (Jamal 2005, 32–34);<sup>5</sup> and the question of how to achieve liberty later pitted those arguing for a negotiated solution against those favoring armed struggle (Mishal and Sela 2000, 49).

Though the saliency of these strategic issues has historically outweighed the importance of ideology for Palestinian national movements, the continuous creation and recreation of Palestinian nationalism have at various times been influenced by Marxism, pan-Arabism, and Islamism (Hroub 2010, 163). As a necessary background to the analysis of Fatah's and Hamas's respective ideologies and nationalist projects, the following two sections will provide brief accounts of how Palestinian nationalism has developed with regards to secularism and religiosity.

## **A Secular Palestinian Nationalism?**

The early years of Palestinian identity formation coincided with a number of historical events and developments that greatly influenced the type of nationalism adopted by the Palestinian nationalist movements. In the aftermath of World War II, a decades long period of decolonization began.<sup>6</sup> This period also saw the beginning of the Cold War, which in turn provided many nationalist movements fighting for independence — including the Palestinians — with a Marxist, anti-Western, and secular ideology (see Rubinstein 1990, 78 ff.). In the Arab world, these developments and ideological currents manifested themselves as a distinct political project, commonly referred to as pan-Arabism. In brief, pan-Arabists claimed that only by uniting under one secular and progressive nation could the Arabs hope

to escape their current state of backwardness and modernize, and only then could they hope to defeat Israel and liberate Palestine (Baumgarten 2005, 27). The Palestinian dimension of pan-Arabism prompted many Palestinian nationalists to adopt this secular pan-Arab ideology, often interspersed with different degrees of leftism and revolutionary ideals (Khalidi 2010, 181; Rubin 1994, 8–9).

When the Arab League established the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, it was naturally closely associated with pan-Arabism and the more powerful Arab leaders (Cobban 1984, 28–29; Hamid 1975, 93–94; ch. 1 in Rubin 1994). However, after the Arab states lost to Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967, both the defeated regimes and pan-Arabism lost a great deal of credibility (Khalidi 2010, 193).<sup>7</sup> The outcome of the war demonstrated to the PLO that Arab patronage would be insufficient to liberate Palestine. The PLO therefore freed itself from such direct sponsorship and developed into an independent Palestinian organization (Hamid 1975, 98). From then until the first *intifada* (1987),<sup>8</sup> Palestinian politics became synonymous with the PLO (Hilal 2010; Malki 2006; Muslih 1990, 4). Note, however, that while pan-Arabism lost support among the Palestinian factions in the PLO, secular, revolutionary, and anti-Western ideals remained influential. As a result of their ideological roots, all the 10 factions currently in the PLO are allegedly secular.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their proclaimed allegiance to secularist ideals, most of the Palestinian factions are said to lack ideological depth (Sayigh 1997, 56). This can in part be attributed to the unresolved nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the aforementioned strategic issues of how Palestine should be liberated, how much to liberate, and by whom have been more important than the nature of the future Palestinian state. It is argued here that the saliency of these strategic issues have worked to confuse ideology and strategy as sources of legitimacy and popularity in Palestinian politics. For example, while Palestinians who joined the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine might have supported the establishment of a progressive, secular, pan-Arab nation-state, it is assumed that most did so because of the goals and strategic positions of the movement, i.e., complete liberation of Palestine through armed struggle (Cubert 1997).<sup>10</sup> Conversely, Palestinians who support Fatah do so because of its pragmatism and promise to achieve *some* liberty for Palestinians after more than 60 years, not necessarily because of Fatah's alleged revolutionary ideals and secularist nationalism.

Two additional and inter-linked factors have further added to this ideological shallowness: interference from regional and international actors (Hilal 2010); and the long exile of the PLO leadership (Jamal 2005, 2). The exile of the PLO leadership forced its factions into dependency relationships with different countries, prompting them to modify their ideological and strategic positions so as not to alienate their patrons (see e.g., Golan 1980). This exile also led to a marked distance between the different Palestinian communities — most importantly between those inside the occupied territories and the Palestinian diaspora — which further complicated the formation of a coherent ideological framework (Hilal 1993). In sum, organized Palestinian politics for long operated under circumstances which inhibited ideological deliberations regarding questions of religiosity and secularism. The secular aspect of the PLO factions' nationalist projects is thus considered to be largely a by-product of the ideological climate dictated by the Cold War.

### The “Rise” of Religion in Palestinian Nationalism

Even if the overwhelming majority of Palestinians are Muslims, the above indicates that historically Islam was neither used as a tool to mobilize Palestinians, nor as a marker for Palestinian identity.<sup>11</sup> On the political level, the obvious reason for this is that the secular PLO led by Fatah has traditionally been the hegemon in Palestinian politics. In addition to the previously mentioned reasons for the lack of ideological depth among the Palestinian liberation movements, it should be noted that the PLO has never held popular elections to its different bodies, including its quasi-parliament and highest body, the Palestine National Council (Muslih 1990, 5). In lieu of elections and with opinion polls carried out only rarely and infrequently, the constituent organizations of the PLO have had no reliable way of knowing whether their ideologies and national projects indeed resonated with popular opinion (Hroub 2010, 168; Shadid and Seltzer 1988a, 23–24).<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the main Islamist organization in the occupied territories, the Muslim Brotherhood, stayed apolitical until the late 1980s. The Brotherhood maintained that the re-Islamization of Palestine was a prerequisite for liberation, and consequently occupied itself with religious and social activism rather than politics (Hroub 2010, 162–166; Shadid and Seltzer 1988b, 67). And of the religious groups which were politically active — such as the Brotherhood splinter group Islamic Jihad — none

grew big enough to challenge the PLO's monopoly of Palestinian factional politics (Abu-Amr 1994, 93).<sup>13</sup> Finally, it should be noted that the politicization of Islam in Palestine — as elsewhere in the region — only began in earnest following the Iranian revolution in 1979 (Aburaiya 2009; Hroub 2010, 170).

It is thus unsurprising that three polls carried out in the occupied territories in 1982, 1984, and 1986 all indicated that there was no real challenge — religious or otherwise — to the secular nationalism pursued by Fatah (Shadid and Seltzer 1988a; 1988b; Smith 1982). In the 1982 poll, 56% of West Bank respondents stated that they “wanted a ‘secular-democratic’ Palestinian state,” thus underlining the strong position of Fatah's secular-nationalist project (Smith 1982). The results from these three polls also indicated, however, that religion was making inroads into Palestinian politics during the 1980s, and could come to produce a “cleavage within Palestinian society ... between those advocating secularism and those who advocate religious alternatives” (Shadid and Seltzer 1988a, 24). For one, the 1982 poll found that 35% of respondents indeed preferred an Islamic Palestinian state to a secular-democratic one (Smith 1982).<sup>14</sup> And though the results between the polls are not directly comparable because of differences in sampling and questionnaires, 56% of respondents in the 1986 poll supported either a Palestinian state governed according to Islamic Law (26%) or a state based on Arab nationalism and Islam (30%) (Shadid and Seltzer 1988a, 24).

A final indication that Islam became increasingly politicized during the 1980s is found in the election results to the student councils at Palestinian universities. Though Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Palestinian Communist Party (later the Palestinian People's Party) all fared well in elections in the West Bank universities, by and large winning majorities and the most powerful positions, the Islamist Blocs consistently obtained around one-third of the votes (Robinson 1997, 19–27).<sup>15</sup> Combined, these election results from the universities and the available polling data indicate that the hegemonic position of Fatah and its secular-nationalist project were increasingly at odds with large parts of the Palestinian grass-roots during the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Shadid and Seltzer cautioned that if Fatah failed to “produce tangible [political] results” one could expect their support to be transferred to the Islamic movement, which in turn “undoubtedly would shift its strategy to armed struggle and violent confrontation with Israel” (1989, 297–298).<sup>17</sup>

## COMPARING THE NATIONALISMS OF FATAH AND HAMAS

To investigate the relevance of the secular-religious cleavage to understanding Palestinian factional politics, the following sections will outline and compare the ideological development of Fatah and Hamas.<sup>18</sup>

### Fatah – From Secular Nationalism to Ideological Opportunism

Fatah was established in the late 1950s (Cobban 1984, 23),<sup>19</sup> with the stated aim “to liberate the whole of Palestine and destroy the foundations of [the] colonialist, Zionist occupation state and society” (Sayigh 1997, 87). Modeled after and inspired by the contemporary liberation wars and movements — and in particular those in Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam — Fatah had established itself as the main Palestinian nationalist faction advocating armed struggle against the Israeli occupation by the time it took leadership of the PLO in 1968 (Baumgarten 2005; Rubin 1994, 1–23). Partly as a side effect of adopting the strategies and tactics of these guerrilla groups, and partly as a byproduct of the Cold War — with the Soviet Union sponsoring many liberation movements against the colonial powers of the West — Fatah adopted a revolutionary and secular ideology, which it combined with a nationalist rhetoric influenced by the anti-colonial discourse.

A brief look at Fatah’s 1968 Constitution supports such an interpretation. The first 16 of its 130 articles are particularly relevant, as these deals with Fatah’s principles and goals. Among other claims, it states that Fatah is a national, revolutionary movement, fighting against Zionism, colonialism and international imperialism. In this way, Fatah frames the liberation of Palestine as part of global fight against Western colonialism and imperialism, situating itself squarely in the anti-colonial camp (Rubin 1994, 8–9). Articles 12, 13, and 14 deal specifically with the nationalistic goals of the movement. Summarized, they state that Fatah fights to liberate the whole of Palestine and eradicate the Zionist existence (Article 12); establish a sovereign, democratic state in which all citizens will have legal and equal rights and there will be no racial or religious discrimination (Article 13); and to ensure that this state shall be of a progressive nature (Article 14) (Fateh 2005).<sup>20</sup>

Though the Constitution is imbued with such revolutionary rhetoric, Fatah has arguably only paid lip-service to these ideals. And while the strategic issues and international interference discussed above historically



undermined the ideological rigidity of all the Palestinian factions, Fatah has consistently been the most flexible and pragmatic of them (Jamal 2005, 19). As a consequence of its strong focus on nationalism and lack of ideological rigidity, Fatah has been free to adopt and discard ideological rhetoric as its leaders have seen fit. During the late 1960s and 1970s, Fatah therefore utilized the then prevalent anti-colonial discourse, as can be glanced from its Constitution. However, as long as pan-Arabism remained an ideological force to be reckoned with,<sup>21</sup> it made sense for Fatah to downplay the exclusivity of its Palestinian nationalism. Instead, Fatah framed its goal of liberating Palestine as the necessary first step toward Arab unity (Sayigh 1997, 198–199).<sup>22</sup> Later, after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Islamic revivalism that followed, Fatah supplemented its old slogans, such as “the right to self-determination” and “revolution until victory,” with verses and excerpts from the Koran (Frisch 2005).

The 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence is one example of Fatah’s ideological elasticity and increased religiosity. This proclamation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders constituted a radical shift in PLO politics as it in effect recognized Israel, reduced the Palestinian territorial claim by some 78%, and paved the way for negotiations with Israel (Muslih 1990; Palestine National Council 1988).<sup>23</sup> Relevant to the question of a secular-religious cleavage in Palestinian politics, the language of the declaration departed from previous documents and communiqués. Traditionally, these were written in a language without religious references, interspersed instead with revolutionary and leftist rhetoric. The Declaration of Independence, however, began with a *basmala*, the Islamic phrase “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,” and contained numerous additional religious references, for example defining Palestine as “the land of the three monotheistic faiths,” quoting Koranic verses in full, and ending with “Allah Most Mighty has told the truth,” a phrase commonly said after reciting the Koran.

A powerful and more recent example of Fatah’s increased religiosity is found in the temporary constitution of the Palestinian Authority, the 2003 Basic Law (Palestinian Legislative Council 2003). Fatah had the majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council, and its leader Yasser Arafat was the Palestinian Authority president when the law was formulated, ratified, and promulgated.<sup>24</sup> As such, the movement had every opportunity to codify its still ostensibly leftist and secular ideology. Instead, the constitution also begins with the *basmala*, and goes on to proclaim “Islam [to be] the official religion in Palestine” and that “[t]he principles of Islamic *Shari’a* shall be a principal source of legislation” (Palestinian Legislative Council

2003).<sup>25</sup> In short, the Palestinian Authority constitution authored by Fatah is a glaring break from the “progressive society” the movement promised in its 1968 Charter.

This use of Islamic symbols in the nationalist rhetoric is interesting for the case at hand. As Fatah’s seemingly sudden religiosity coincided with the increasingly important role of religion in Palestinian politics and identity formation in the 1980s, this substitution of revolutionary ideals with Islamic ones can easily be interpreted as political maneuvering. Fatah simply aligned its rhetoric with changing public sentiment to avoid alienating the increasingly religious population in the occupied territories. And while this change of rhetoric bears evidence of a highly pragmatic political movement, such obviously opportunistic behavior also weakened Fatah’s ideological credentials.

Confronted with these examples of political pragmatism and ideological opportunism, a senior Fatah cadre retorted that Fatah has been and continues to be the

National Movement for the Liberation of Palestine, and *not* a party which has an ideology. We have no ideology. We are not Marxist. We are not Islamist. Fatah is not a party with a political or social program.<sup>26</sup>

For him, the only task for Fatah was the liberation of Palestine, and if the movement needed to adapt and change its ideology and strategy to maintain its position as the hegemon in Palestinian politics and eventually achieve liberation, he saw no problem with that. Scholars and commentators interviewed by the author largely supported such an interpretation of Fatah. Dr. Giacaman, for example, argued that Fatah lacks institutional cohesion to such an extent that it might be better to think of it only as a name or idea strongly associated with the liberation of Palestine. Fatah would thus survive as a major player in Palestinian politics even if its ideology and personnel were all replaced.<sup>27</sup> In a similar vein, analyst Jamil Rabah argued that Fatah has no ideological basis bar the liberation of parts of historical Palestine. This allows its members to operate under the Fatah umbrella while holding highly divergent views on issues ranging from women’s rights, human rights, secularism, liberalism, atheism, and Islamism.<sup>28</sup>

Following this line of argument, one should not attach too much importance to Fatah’s religiosity, as this too can be replaced if or when the ideological currents change. The relevance of a secular-religious cleavage to understanding Fatah’s behavior in Palestinian politics is thus called into

question: instead of keeping its secularism as an alternative to the religious Hamas, Fatah aligned its rhetoric and policies with the increasingly religious Palestinian electorate. As such, Fatah behaves as a Downsian self-interested party, formulating policies and picking positions in order to win influence and office, rather than seeking power to implement a certain political program (Downs 1957). One should therefore be careful not to assign too much weight to its stated ideological positions.

### **Hamas – From Religious Absolutism to Strategic Pragmatism**

Shadid and Seltzer's prediction that in lieu of tangible political results produced by Fatah, the Islamists would rise to the task and gain popularity and legitimacy began to materialize when Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) was founded on the eve of the first *intifada* in late 1987. Initially established as the armed wing of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas grew rapidly and had by 1992 eclipsed the Brotherhood itself, taking over as the main Islamist movement in the occupied territories.<sup>29</sup> While Hamas's pivotal role in the *intifada* is one factor explaining the movement's popularity, it seems reasonable to assume that the increasing religiosity among Palestinians also played a part in its rise to prominence. Representing an Islamist alternative to the secular nationalists headed by Fatah, Hamas could easily exploit the increasing numbers of religious — and also politically disenfranchised — Palestinians as their constituency (Abu-Amr 1993; Gunning 2008, 39; Knudsen 2005, 1382–1384; Robinson 1997, 149).

Underlining Hamas's Islamist roots, the 1988 Charter proclaims its ultimate goal as being to raise “the banner of Allah on every inch of Palestine”<sup>30</sup> and establish an Islamic state throughout what are today Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Defining Palestine as an eternal, indivisible *Waqf* (Islamic trust), the Charter further claims that it is the obligation of all Muslims to protect and liberate Palestine from oppressors and aggressors, and that to give up any part of Palestine would be tantamount to forfeiting Islam. However, while Hamas framed the goal of liberating the whole of historical Palestine in religious terms, the indivisible nature of the Palestinian territories in Hamas's rhetoric can also be interpreted as political maneuvering and a bid to become the new standard-bearer of the Palestinian nationalistic project. As mentioned, in 1988 the PLO unilaterally proclaimed a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, a move that in effect recognized Israel and

surrendered most of historical Palestine. By refusing to “[r]ecognise the Zionist existence” or “[c]ede the larger part of Palestine to the Zionist entity” (Hroub 2000, 293), Hamas thus positioned itself firmly in opposition to the accommodating strategy pursued by Fatah and the PLO.

Importantly, the delimited territorial claim to Palestine constitutes something of a departure from Hamas’s Islamist ideological heritage, which by and large rejects the notion that any one territory is more sacred than another.<sup>31</sup> This, in turn, further supports the interpretation of Hamas’s territorial claims as politically and not religiously motivated. Similarly, when the Charter states that Hamas’s nationalism “is part and parcel of [its] religious ideology [and based on] material, humanistic, and geographical ties,” the movement also ignores the traditional denunciation of racially or nationally based identity found in much Islamist thought (Nusse 1998, 47–52).<sup>32</sup>

Hamas’s Charter further asserts that “[t]here is no solution to the Palestinian Problem except by *jihad*,” and that attempts to solve the conflict with Israel through negotiations are futile. This call for *jihad* and uncompromising stance toward negotiations are often taken as proof both of Hamas’s extremism and of its religiosity. However, these positions can also be interpreted as a religious framing of Hamas’s political and strategic positions, i.e., opposition to negotiations and armed resistance as the preferred strategy against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Many of Hamas’s early communiqués and documents contain such a religious-political duality.

Despite the clear political dimensions in much of Hamas’s nationalistic rhetoric, the movement’s overly religious language has worked to distinguish Hamas from the secular ideology associated with Fatah, and has thus fueled the perception of an emerging secular-religious cleavage in Palestinian politics. The harsh language, absolutist claims, and allegations of racism and conspiracy against Zionism found in the Charter has also led many observers to conclude that Hamas is an extreme, absolutist, and uncompromising movement (see e.g., Levitt 2006). However, while the Charter has remained untouched since it was written, its exact status and importance for Hamas is uncertain. A number of Hamas leaders — including the head of Hamas’s political bureau, Khaled Mashal — have distanced themselves from the Charter, arguing that it was never an authoritative document meant to instruct the movement’s goals and strategies (Tamimi 2007, 149–156). Rather, it should be seen as “a proclamation for *jihad* directed at the Palestinian people and formulated in the context of the 1987–1993 intifada” (Usama Hamdan

paraphrased in International Crisis Group 2004, 13). In support of this position, scholars have argued that Hamas is not static but rather in constant development, pointing out that it has published a number of far less absolutist and religious documents outlining the movement's often rather pragmatic positions on a range of issues (e.g., Hroub 2006; see also the appendices in Tamimi 2007, 265–316).

Maybe the most important development in Hamas's ideology is the implicit recognition of Israel in calling for a temporary two-state solution based on the 1967 borders (Hroub 2000, 73–86).<sup>33</sup> While Hamas's version of the two-state solution is worded as a temporary measure, defended ideologically through the Islamic concept of *hudna*, or long-term truce, it implies an acknowledgment of Israel's long-term existence. Furthermore, by redefining its final objective of the complete liberation of historical Palestine into a vague goal to be reached “later” and by accepting an interim solution based on the 1967 borders, Hamas in effect emulated the 10-point program ratified by the PLO some 20 years earlier (Hamid 1975; Palestine National Council 1974). There are also strong indications that, in tandem with its increased focus on political pragmatism, Hamas turned less religious. Whereas its Charter and other early communiqués were riddled with religious rhetoric and quotations from the Koran, more recent documents focus almost exclusively on practical politics. Though there are still verses from the Koran in Hamas's communiqués, an analysis of three official Hamas documents from 2005 and 2006 concluded that such religious overtones had decreased dramatically, constituting a “‘new’ discourse of diluted religious content [which] reflects genuine and cumulative changes in Hamas” (Hroub 2006, 26).<sup>34</sup>

It thus seems reasonable to question the explanatory power of the secular-religious cleavage for understanding the political maneuvering of Hamas, and indeed for the development of Palestinian factional politics in general. While Hamas certainly has ushered in a new era in Palestinian factional politics and might have affected the nationalist discourse to some extent, the movement was established when the trend toward increased religiosity among Palestinians was already well underway and had already pushed Fatah in a religious direction.

There are, however, some noteworthy nuances in the rhetoric of the two movements, in particular the fact that Fatah remains committed to secularism, a concept Hamas has never used.<sup>35</sup> Interviewed Hamas members — senior cadres, elected officials, and youth members — referred rather to the concept “civil state” when asked what kind of state Hamas labors to

establish. Exactly what the distinguishing characteristics of such a “civil state” are, however, remains somewhat elusive. Some interviewed Hamas members seemed to interpret the concept as interchangeable with an Islamic — but not theocratic — state, making references to the Prophet Mohammad and the early Caliphs. Only on rare occasions did they employ the term “Islamic state,” however. Others emphasized qualities such as democracy, human rights, an independent judiciary, equality before the law, and religious freedom, but always stopped short of calling it secularism. This reluctance to employ *secularism* might relate to the fact that it is considered a Western concept, often conflated with *atheism* (Tamimi 2002).<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, many Islamists see no need to import such a concept, as Islam and *Sharia* have dealt with religious minorities for centuries through the *dhimmi* concept, which provides non-Muslims with almost the same rights and responsibilities as Muslims (Bahlul 2004).<sup>37</sup> In short, however, there are still uncertainties associated with the ideological goals of Hamas, as the movement has so far been unable to clearly articulate what kind of state it wants to establish.

Even when looking at how Hamas has governed the Gaza Strip from June 2007 onward, its intentions regarding the relationship between Islam and politics remain ambiguous. As the sole ruler of Gaza, Hamas could have implemented its allegedly Islamist ideology. But, despite some well-publicized events related to gender segregation,<sup>38</sup> Hamas has not labored to establish an Islamic state. Instead, it has focused its efforts on staying in power, which — given the international boycott, strict Israeli blockade, and presence of powerful opposition groups within Gaza — has not been an easy task (Brown 2012, 12). Hamas therefore prioritized security over politics, monopolizing violence and persecuting all opposition movements, both secular and Islamist (International Crisis Group 2008, 8–12; Sayigh 2011). As a consequence, the rule of Hamas can be described as similar to that of Fatah, i.e., as unaccountable, authoritarian, and without a clear ideological direction.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, both the rhetoric and practice of Hamas leave its intentions regarding the role of Islam in politics unclear. And these uncertainties regarding Hamas’s goals have ramifications for our ability to explain the movement and its development. They have fostered both the perception that Hamas remains a religious extremist movement, cleverly avoiding concepts with negative connotations in the West, and the view that Hamas has matured and moderated, moving toward political pragmatism while leaving its overly religious goals behind. As is often the case when such conflicting interpretations arise, the truth probably lies somewhere

in between. Based on impressions from long-term fieldwork in the occupied Palestinian territories and among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and through careful analysis of numerous interviews with Hamas members from these localities, it is argued here that the movement has indeed matured and turned increasingly pragmatic. However, it is obvious that there are limits to how far from its Islamic roots Hamas can stray without losing its core supporters. As such, it is concluded that while Hamas was established as a religious-nationalistic liberation movement with absolutist territorial claims, it has since developed into a more pragmatic political party with *a less pronounced* focus on religion (Hroub 2010).

## NOT CLEAVAGE, MEDIAN VOTER

As should be evident by now, the claimed secular-religious cleavage is considered to have little — if any — relevance for what has been labeled “the utter disarray of the Palestinian political field” (Hilal 2010, 24). What is clear, however, is that from the 1980s onward, Islam has come to play an increasingly important role in Palestinian politics and Palestinian identity formation, in tandem with the decreasing importance of Marxism, anti-colonialism, and other secular ideologies following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This development moved the whole Palestinian political spectrum away from secularism toward religiosity.

So, rather than taking the competition between Hamas and Fatah as an indication that they represent different ideological strains of Palestinian politics and nationalism, it is more fruitful to interpret their infighting as something akin to a competition for the Palestinian median voter. As religiosity made inroads into Palestinian politics and identity formation during the 1980s, Fatah’s secularism became increasingly at odds with the grass-roots the movement was supposed to represent. And with the emergence of Hamas in 1987, Fatah suddenly had a competitor espousing exactly the Islamic ideology that was resonating so well among Palestinians. It thus became crucial for Fatah to reorient its ideology to avoid alienating the rising numbers of religious Palestinians and losing its position as hegemon to Hamas. By shedding its secularism and adopting a religious rhetoric, Fatah did exactly this, as if to attempt to catch the Palestinian median voter.<sup>40</sup>

For its part, Hamas also had to moderate its ideology to compete for the median voter. Though Hamas’s religiosity provided the movement with a certain guaranteed level of support, its absolutist territorial claims and

violent strategy proved unpopular in the long run. So, by downplaying the more extreme parts of its initial goals, supplementing violent resistance with political participation, and pursuing pragmatic and practical politics, Hamas in essence moved toward the center of the political spectrum to secure its position and eventually gain increased support.

The renowned Palestinian sociologist Jamil Hilal sums up the relationship between the two and the ideological development of the Palestinian political field in the following way:

Until the Oslo Accords, Fatah was under the ideological influence of the left. The left was there, accompanying it all the time, influencing its language, secularism, even instilling progressive ideas such as egalitarianism and gender equality. When Hamas entered the political field, Fatah instead came to be influenced by Hamas, just as Hamas itself was influenced by Fatah. In short, they have converged towards the political center.<sup>41</sup>

The distinguishing feature of the two movements, then, is not found on the ideological level. And with regards to the contentious strategic points of *how* Palestine should be liberated, *who much* to liberate and *by whom*, they already agree on the latter two; it is the Palestinians themselves who must liberate Palestine, and a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders seems acceptable to both. That leaves the question of *how* to achieve liberty. Despite years of diplomatic deadlock, Fatah still advocates a negotiated solution to the conflict.<sup>42</sup> Hamas, on the other hand, remains officially committed to violent resistance as its preferred strategy. But also here, there are indications that the two are converging. Some leaders in Fatah have called for a return to popular resistance and a third *intifada*, echoing the official position of Hamas.<sup>43</sup> For its part, Hamas has inched closer to Fatah's position by negotiating with Israel via intermediaries (Eldar 2013; Long 2010).

In conclusion, the findings from this analysis indicate that the enmity between the two parties stems neither from ideological differences along a secular-religious axis, nor from strategic differences, but rather from a classic competition for influence, power, and position. Even if Fatah invokes arguments such as self-determination and personal freedom and ostensibly remains committed to some form of secularism, and Hamas for its part employs a religious rhetoric and retains the right to violently resist the Israeli occupation, the practical differences between the two are minute. Fatah has already demonstrated its willingness to replace any progressive part of its ideology with religious arguments in order to



stay relevant in the increasingly religious Palestinian electorate, just as Hamas has moderated its initial absolutist rhetoric and has all but halted its military operations to align itself with Palestinian popular opinion and thus ensure its own survival.

## NOTES

1. See Challand (2009) for a discussion on the current deadlock in Palestinian politics.
2. Here, secularism is defined as “state neutrality towards matters of belief,” not as “a doctrine of unbelief” (Baggini 2006, 205).
3. See Muslih (1989) for an in-depth, historical overview of the origins of Palestinian nationalism, and Khalidi (2010) for a more recent account of Palestinian identity formation.
4. The War of 1948 is called the War of Liberation by the Israelis, and the *nakba* (Arabic for “catastrophe”) by the Palestinians.
5. See also Shadid and Seltzer (1988a, 55).
6. This process was partly aided by the ratification of the “right of self-determination” by the UN, a concept which has greatly influenced and legitimized Palestinian nationalist aspirations (Quigley 1989).
7. The Egyptian intellectual Tareq al-Bashir puts great emphasis on the defeat in 1967 when accounting for his reorientation away from secularism toward Islam (interviewed by Burgat 2003, 26–28).
8. *Intifada* is usually understood to mean “uprising.” The first Palestinian *intifada* broke out in December 1987 and lasted until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993.
9. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and its offshoot the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) are to varying degrees Marxist (or at least leftist) in their outlook (Cubert 1997, 96–112). The DFLP’s own offshoot, the Palestine Democratic Union (known as Fida) is social democratic, as is the Palestinian People’s Party (PPP) (Sayigh 1997, 647), though the latter used to be communist (the PPP was formerly known as the Palestinian Communist Party, PCP). Sai’qa is the Palestinian arm of the Syrian Baathists whereas the Arab Liberation Front (ALF) and the Palestinian Arab Front (PAF) are associated with the Iraqi Baath Party, meaning that they all subscribe to versions of Arab socialism (Cobban 1984, 157, 163). The Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) and the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF) are both minor factions with leftist inclinations (both of which can trace their pedigree to the PFLP). Finally, Fatah (the inverse acronym of Palestinian National Liberation Movement in Arabic, often translated as “conquest”), the largest and most important PLO faction, also subscribes to leftist and secular ideas.
10. For the PFLP, the importance of armed struggle to liberate all of historical Palestine has been such that it has allied itself with organizations whose “only common denominator seems to be an intense hatred for Israel and those who support the Arab-Israeli peace process,” including both Hamas and the DFLP (Cubert 1997, 190).
11. Over 90% of Palestinians living in the occupied territories are Muslim. See also Shadid and Seltzer (1989).
12. When the PLO gained international recognition and was granted non-state observer status in the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 (United Nations General Assembly 1974), the threshold for new factions to enter Palestinian politics was raised dramatically (Hamid 1975).
13. Islamic Jihad was established in 1980 by members of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood in response to the non-confrontational approach of the Palestinian Brotherhood toward the Israeli occupation. It was provoked by the 1967 defeat of the Arab armies, and inspired by the Iranian revolution of 1979 (Abu-Amr 1994, 90–94). See Milton-Edwards (1996) for a comprehensive overview of politicized Islam in the Palestinian territories.
14. That the poll was carried out on the West Bank makes these findings particularly interesting, as it is documented that Palestinians on the Gaza Strip are more religious than their West Bank brethren (Shadid and Seltzer 1989, 295; Shadid 1988, 681).
15. The exceptions to this trend are the Islamic University in Gaza, where the Islamists naturally won the majority, and the Christian Bethlehem University where the Islamists equally naturally fared quite badly (Robinson 1997, 26).

16. Like Shamir and Shikaki, it is acknowledged that these results “probably do not mirror the actual factional balance of power in public opinion, since they are too small and too particular to reflect the mood and interests of the general public” (2010, 132).

17. An important strategic dimension relates to the discussion of whether the Palestinians supported a two-state solution or still wanted to liberate the whole of Palestine. On this issue, the gap between the strategy pursued by Fatah and opinion among the Palestinian population widened following the PLO’s decision in 1974 to accept a two-state solution as an interim step toward the complete liberation of Palestine.

18. There are other factions in the occupied territories that could have been analyzed. As secular alternatives, both the pan-Arabists and some of the radical leftist movements still exist and continue to command a certain level of support. However, none have achieved more than 10% support since polling began in the Palestinian territories in the early 1990s (Center for Palestine Research and Studies 2000; Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research 2011), nor has any of them had “coalition” or “blackmailing” potential, i.e., been able to influence Palestinian politics according to their ideology. As such, they fail to qualify as “relevant parties” (Sartori 1976, 108). And while members of different PLO and non-PLO factions have been part of Palestinian Authority cabinets, this has been a result of personality and nepotism, not ideology or factional allegiance. There are also Islamic alternatives operating in Palestinian politics, such as Islamic Jihad, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and a number of Salafi groups. Again, however, none of these is considered to be popular or powerful enough to merit analysis in this context. Hamas is by far the most influential Palestinian Islamist party, and has consistently been ranked as the second most popular party in the occupied territories after Fatah, eventually winning the 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (Center for Palestine Research and Studies 2000; Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research 2011).

19. There are some discrepancies regarding the exact date between the different historical accounts of Fatah’s founding, ranging from 1958 to 1962 (Cobban 1984, 23–4; Sayigh 1997, 84).

20. Of course, the officially stated goals of any political party or movement might well be sidelined for different reasons, and should not be taken at face value (Panebianco 1988). They are nevertheless considered a useful source of data on ideology and policy positions (Budge et al. 2001).

21. I.e., until the defeat of the Arab armies at the hands of Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967.

22. The exact slogan was the reverse of the pan-Arabist, i.e., “Palestine is the road to unity” rather than “unity is the road to Palestine” (Sayigh 1997, 198).

23. This ideological elasticity and strong pragmatism has had consequences on the strategic level, for example in 1974, when Fatah led the PLO to adopt the so-called 10-point political program. This program opened the way for alternative strategies in the fight for liberation (i.e., negotiations) and arguably for the eventual recognition of Israel and acceptance of a two-state solution within the 1967 borders (Palestine National Council 1974). In short, it constituted a radical shift for the PLO in both strategy and goals.

24. With 62 of 88 seats (CEC 1996).

25. *Sharia* is Islamic law, drawn from the Koran.

26. Interviewed in Ramallah, May 24, 2011.

27. Interviewed in Ramallah, April 5, 2011.

28. Interviewed in Ramallah, March 23, 2011.

29. Robinson (1997, 149) labels the creation of Hamas an “internal coup” within the Muslim Brotherhood.

30. All quotations from the Charter are taken from Maqdsi’s (1993) translation.

31. Naturally, most Islamist movements accept the existence of the states in which they operate, but in general their ultimate aim is not to create territorially bounded Islamic states, but rather to recreate a larger Caliphate (Brubaker 2012, 13).

32. For Islamists, Islam should of course constitute the main identity marker, which goes counter to the nature of nationalist identities. Indeed, Islamists are often considered to be explicitly “anti-nationalist [or] supra-national” (Brubaker 2012, 14).

33. This implicit recognition of Israel can be traced back to an offer of a long-term truce along the 1967 borders made by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin already in 1994 (Usher 1995, 31). Various Hamas leaders have since repeated the offer numerous times, most recently by Khaled Mashal (2012) and Ghazi Hamad (Eldar 2013).

34. Importantly, one of the documents indicating a decreased focus on religion within Hamas was found in its electoral platform for the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, which Hroub

(2006, 9) argues “constitutes without a doubt the broadest vision that Hamas has ever presented concerning all aspects of Palestinian life.” By focusing on practical politics in its campaign rather than staying true to its Islamist roots, Hamas moved toward the center of the political spectrum in an attempt to maximize support. For an account of Hamas’s decision to run in the elections, see Løvlie (2013).

35. An interviewed female Member of Parliament (MP) from Fatah (dressed in an Islamic headscarf, *hijab*) stated that “I am secular and I am Muslim!”, as if to underline Fatah’s commitment to secularism. Interviewed in Ramallah, May 22, 2011.

36. Atheism, or *kafir* in Arabic (meaning unbeliever), has negative and even offensive connotations for many in the Arab world.

37. *Dhimmi* translates roughly as “protected minority.” Such protected minorities often have to pay an extra tax in exchange for residency, but are also exempt from certain duties.

38. One example was when Hamas ruled that women would not be allowed to compete in the Gaza Marathon in 2013, which led the UN organizers to cancel the event (Akram 2013; BBC 2013; Greenwood 2013). Another example was when Hamas allegedly closed down a water park in Gaza in 2010, apparently because it allowed men and women to bathe together. The water park was subsequently torched, supposedly by Hamas-affiliated gunmen (Putz 2010; Sherwood 2010).

39. Indicative of Hamas’s reluctance to pursue its stated ideological goals, its MP Marwan Abu Ras noted that “[w]e want the courts to apply Sharia law, but we won’t compel the people” (quoted in International Crisis Group 2008, 15).

40. In a poll from 2010, 82% of Palestinians stated that they would prefer a state governed by religion over a secular one (Near East Consulting 2010, 46). Hence it would be tantamount to political suicide for Fatah to stay with its secular ideology.

41. Interviewed in Ramallah April 4, 2011.

42. Recently, this was exemplified in the Palestinian bid to upgrade its membership status in the UN. In 2011, the PLO tried to obtain full membership as a state in the UN, but failed as the procedures for attaining this status need the blessing of the UN Security Council and the US promised to use its veto. In 2012, the PLO instead applied successfully to become a state observer, an upgrade requiring only a qualified majority in the General Assembly.

43. For example, Marwan Barghouti, a prominent Fatah leader imprisoned by Israel, has called for a third *intifada* (Haaretz 2012).

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