

Charles University in Prague

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Institute of Philosophy and Religious Studies

MASTER THESIS

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**The Concept of Martyrdom in Islam and Its (Re)interpretations in
Current Islamic Movements: A Case Study on the Palestinian Hamas**

Koncept mučednictví v islámu a jeho (re)interpretace v moderních
islamistických hnutích: Případová studie na palestinský Hamás

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Podpis

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of the thesis is the concept of *jihad* and martyrdom in Islam. It seeks to present these religious ideas from very diverse perspectives and argues that seemingly discontinuous dimensions are all parts of the nature of the phenomenon. In the world of Islam, religion is an omnipresent aspect of a public life. Hence, the historical experience, culture, socio-economics, and politics, they all manifest in religious narratives. Martyrdom embodies these complexities as well. Historically and culturally, martyrdom has been perceived as an expression of utmost activism in the struggle of a believer for the betterment of the Islamic society. Leading a responsible and truthful life sometimes demands the ultimate sacrifice of one's life for the cause. This worldly responsibility for the well-being of the Islamic *umma* is one dimension of complex dynamics of the Islamist movements like the Palestinian Hamas. For them, martyrdom is only one moment, the climax, which requires leading the whole life as a responsible believer in the first place. In this sense, martyrdom is a celebration of a meaningful life rather than death. This commitment of Hamas to the community, its radical understanding of the politics of the struggle, along with the particular socio-economic, and political situation in Palestine form an attractive platform that many Palestinians identify with.

ABSTRAKT

Práce se zabývá koncepty *džihádu* a mučednictví v náboženském systému islámu. Hlavním cílem práce je představit tyto náboženské koncepty z různých perspektiv a dokázat, že dimenze s fenoménem mučednictví zdánlivě nesouvisející jsou jeho integrální součástí. Ve světě islámu je náboženství všudypřítomným aspektem veřejného života. Proto se v něm manifestují i jevy, které jsou od něho na první pohled odlišné jako historická zkušenost, kulturní hodnoty, socioekonomická sféra nebo politika. Také fenomén mučednictví v sobě zahrnuje všechny tyto prvky. Z historického a kulturního hlediska bylo mučednictví vždy vnímáno jako výraz nejvyššího aktivismu ve snaze věřícího o zdokonalení muslimské společnosti. Avšak k tomu, aby člověk žil zodpovědným a smysluplným životem, je někdy zapotřebí obětovat pro dobro věci i vlastní život. Tato světská zodpovědnost za blaho celé společnosti je jedním z mnoha rozměrů složité dynamiky islamistických hnutí, mezi něž se řadí i palestinský Hamás. V ideologii hnutí je mučednictví pouze jedním momentem, konečným vyvrcholením, kterému ale předchází celý život zodpovědného věřícího. V tomto smyslu je pak mučednictví oslavou smysluplného života spíše než smrti. Zodpovědnost vůči komunitě, která je pevnou součástí ideologie Hamásu a jeho radikální chápání vedení konfliktu s Izraelem spolu se specifickou socioekonomickou a politickou situací v Palestině pak utvářejí program, se kterým se identifikuje množství Palestinců.

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INTRODUCTION

The present thesis attempts to depict the concept of martyrdom in Islam and its contemporary interpretations epitomized by what is called “suicide terrorism.” We will use the Palestinian Hamas as a case study because the contemporary radical Islam is so diverse that no single theory can explain the complexity of the phenomenon. Motivations and reasoning of global Salafi-Jihadists for perpetrating the suicide attacks are very different from the ones of traditional local movements like Hamas or Hezbollah that perceive themselves as national liberation movements. Therefore, we have deliberately chosen to focus on a single organization because understanding the local conditions is fundamental for understanding the movement itself.

Notwithstanding that self-immolations are a widespread phenomenon and organizations which perpetrate them are a frequently discussed topic of many academic disciplines, researching on the subject is not void of problems. Likewise martyrdom, also Hamas -- the Islamic Resistance movement -- is often misunderstood and painted in a reductionist way in black-and-white. Contrary to this portrait, we would like to demonstrate that Hamas is not a mere military organization devoted to a single cause. Rather the very opposite is true. Hamas aims to be as pluralistic and all-encompassing as Islam itself (in a way, it has no other choice if it is a truly Islamic organization). It strives to penetrate and influence all aspects of people’s life and acts in various ways simultaneously. Hamas sees itself first and foremost as a religious movement and all its other activities are derived from there. Hence, it can act as a political party, a national government, a communal provider of social welfare, and a militant struggler at the same time.

To the different understanding of martyrdom and varied cultural perceptions of the subject attests the terminology which serves to describe the act of self-immolation. For what the Palestinians call “martyrdom operation,” the Western academic discourse uses the term “suicide terrorism.” The discrepant labels refer to the fact that both sides ascribe to the same act a very different meaning. What the West perceives as a suicide of an ill-minded individual is for most of the Palestinians and the wider Islamic world a selfless act of self-sacrifice which

brings benefit to the whole nation. Nevertheless, even the Muslim community itself has not arrived to a definite consensus on the issue and religious authorities carry on in discussions whether it is a suicide or not. Since we are not setting out to settle the debate among Muslim sages, we do not make any distinction between the two terms and use them both in the same way, notably because the notion “suicide terrorism” is well established in our academic discourse.

Suicide terrorism represents a topic which arises many controversies and how many studies on the subject have been written, perhaps so many views have been adopted. Moreover, suicide terrorism is due to its nature a politically and emotionally loaded issue. In the face of vivid media coverage on terrorist attacks, it is difficult to stay indifferent and unbiased. As Jeroen Gunning observes, a frequent phenomenon within the scholarly discourse on suicide terrorism is seeing the subject of the study through the dichotomous lens of “us” and the evil, daemonic “other.”¹ This rigid division inherently leads to adoption of various kinds of biased views.

A different kind of logic is also peculiar to the Western scholarly work. It usually neatly presents concise overviews of schools of thought, ideas, concepts, and their historical development but it appears to fail to pay attention to the arguments, opinions, reasoning, and understanding of the issue by the “other” or to take them seriously. Our way of thinking is very good in classifying, labelling, and chronologizing, and as a result, it sometimes tends to simplify the complexity and interconnectivity of realities on the ground and see the suicide terrorism as a simple phenomenon with a clear-cut explanation.

Hence, the present work attempts to contribute to the outgoing academic debate by pointing out the complex nature of suicide terrorism. Throughout the paper we will touch upon the historical, cultural, religious, and sociological causes that nourish the prevalence of the phenomenon. These dimensions and their concurrence are often overlooked and a simple explanation is sought -- in a sense that those people who strap themselves with an explosive belt and set forth to kill civilians are either totally insane individuals with suicidal

¹ J. Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 5.

tendencies, religious fanatics or people who have been brainwashed by terrorist organizations. Yet, we will attempt to demonstrate that the reality is far more complex and martyrdom in Palestine is not perceived as a mere suicide but rather as a “complex social performance expressive of key cultural values.”² On the other hand, the political and strategic dimensions of suicide terrorism will be adverted only on the margins because they have been plentifully discussed elsewhere.

Another aim of the paper is to present the “view from within” the Muslim community, the Palestinian society and the Hamas movement itself. We need to sort of put ourselves into someone else’s shoes to genuinely comprehend his views and motivations for a certain kind of behaviour. A lot of scholarly work tries to apply its own logic in explaining the phenomenon of suicide terrorism and largely downplays the logic of those who promote and execute such means. Therefore we will try to show the “other” view, the “view from within” as seen through the eyes of the “other.” We seek to outline how the “other” understands the issue but without any intention to judge the legitimacy of such understanding. However, empathy shall not be mistaken for sympathy since trying to understand the “other” view is not equivalent to advocating it.³

The first chapter provides a brief synopsis of the academic discussion on suicide terrorism. Four main approaches how to study the subject are introduced. The opening chapter also contains a few words on the methodology applied in the paper. We will draw mainly on literature that is grounded in field research and takes into account complex situation on the ground.

The next two chapters describe the concept of *jihad* and martyrdom in Islam. We will see that these historical concepts are still a living tradition which is deeply rooted in collective consciousness. Religious traditions in the Muslim world play a role of cultural norms that can be modified and reinterpreted to answer the problems that the Muslim community is contended with nowadays.

The fourth and fifth chapters describe how these religious concepts and cultural norms are interpreted in Palestine. It will be argued that the Palestine occupies

² N. Whitehead and N. Abufarha, “Suicide, Violence, and Cultural Conceptions of Martyrdom in Palestine”, *Social Research* 75.2 (2008): p. 397.

³ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 15.

a special status within the Muslim world. Hence, the gravity of the local situation allows for more radical conceptions. Out of the solidarity with the Palestinian cause, the religious authorities are willing to give a green light to martyrdom operations which are deemed forbidden in places like contemporary Iraq, the centre of suicide bombings, where the insurgents have plenty of other resources to resist the foreign presence in the country.

Last chapter is devoted specifically to the Palestinian Hamas which occupies a special position within the Palestinian society due to its commitment to social welfare. Contrary to Palestinian secularist movements like Fatah, Hamas combines national struggle for self-determination with religious values. But on the top of that, it is not interested only in the armed struggle against Israel infused with religious spirit like the Islamic Jihad. Hamas also aims at bringing the Palestinian society back to Islamic values.

1. DEFINING METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Our Western understanding of what is Hamas and especially what is its message in regard to suicide bombings seems to be very incoherent. While some scholars portray it as a one-dimensional organization devoted to terror, others speak about a charitable movement in charge of extensive social network. Different academic disciplines hold different views of the movement's nature. Following is a presentation of four main academic approaches to the logic and actions of the Palestinian Hamas.

1. As an Islamic religious movement in substance, Hamas has been a subject of research for the discipline of **Islamic studies**. This approach is in principle focused on theoretical knowledge and intellectual history. Traditional Islamic studies prioritize to describe Islamic views on various issues as captured in doctrinal texts over the work with empirical data. While this theoretical framework is essential for understanding Hamas' ideology, we also need to take into account that specific conditions on the ground re-shape and re-define actual interpretation of Islamic dogmas. To be able to address a people's needs, these dogmas need to be re-interpreted in order to resonate with living reality. The history of religious traditions demonstrates that such dynamism is an integral part of monotheistic religiosity. Hence, the Islamic studies perspective as such is not capable of grasping the whole complexity of the phenomenon.⁴
2. Likewise, scholars and analysts involved in the **security-oriented approach** of terrorism studies have often been accused of relying overly on textual sources while "never meeting a terrorist" and thus overlooking the social and personal context of the problem studied.⁵ Moreover, their primary aim is national security, and they are thus prone to using the utilitarian logic stating "let's understand the problem so that we can fight it better" than to strive for more objective formulations. This attitude stems from the problem that policy making requires concrete goals and

⁴ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

milestones and does not appreciate soaring phenomenological debates. Therefore, policy advisors have a leaning toward clear-cut opinions and decisions rather than toward open-end discussions on the subject.

A notable example of the security-oriented approach which focuses solely on demonizing the movement and its use of violence is Matthew Levitt's book *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*.⁶ Levitt presents Hamas as a unitary organization entirely devoted to terror. He disagrees with the portrayal of a complex, multi-dimensional movement which possesses a number of separate wings devoted to a wide spectrum of purposes. Levitt denounces this "myth of disparate wings."⁷ In his view, Hamas pursues a single goal which is the destruction of Israel. The organization's political and social activities are meant to serve this absolute goal. Not only does Levitt disregard socio-historical and political context, he also links Hamas to Al-Qaeda's financing networks and suggests that Hamas might attack "Western interests", thus widening its scope of targets.⁸

3. The perception of Hamas as a movement dedicated to one single cause is not unusual among **political scientists** either. Large volumes of political studies describe the movement as a political organization which streamlines all its activities to achieve its political goals. Da'wa, the Hamas-run social network, is regarded as political opportunism. Likewise, the suicide bombings against Israel are considered to serve the same purpose: increasing the movement's appeal among Palestinians. While there is no doubt that Hamas uses suicide bombings instrumentally, it is also engaged in a myriad of other activities, most of them social and communal, in which it arguably believes with the same intensity. A number of scholars in political studies thus tend to overlook

⁶ For detailed analysis of Levitt's flawed argumentation see: S. Roy (rev.), "M. Levitt, *Hamas*", *Middle East Policy* 14.2 (2007): 149-174, available from: http://www.politicalreviewnet.com/polrev/reviews/MEPO/R_1061_1924_149_1007480.asp (8/6/2013); cf. S. Erlanger (rev.), "Militant Zeal", *The New York Times*, June 25, 2006, available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/25/books/review/25erlanger.html?_r=0 (8/6/2013); cf. Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 23.

⁷ M. Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167 and 204.

the “ends” and focus their attention on the “means” that serve reaching those “ends” -- in Hamas’ case physical and spiritual liberation of the land of Palestine and its people -- thinking that the “means” are also the “ends”.⁹ Moreover, the assumption that Hamas acquires legitimacy only through covert brainwashing again neglects the social context. It will be argued thereafter that Hamas builds on a social and cultural recognition of the concept of martyrdom which is broader and deeper than mere political manipulation.¹⁰

In contrast to such limited studies, there exist multidisciplinary studies focused on politics which base their argumentation on a long-term field research. As an example we can mention the work of Jeroen Gunning, in particular his book on Hamas called *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence*. He has also written extensively on the theory he applies when studying the movement, promoting what he calls a “critically self-reflective methodology.”¹¹ Gunning argues that many Western experts studying Hamas adopt a biased view due to their unwillingness to “humanize the other” and to overcome the “us and them” dichotomy which sees the world in black-and-white.¹² He also denounces misleading generalizing labels like “religious terrorism” that are in essence empty concepts with no real meaning.¹³

Despite the fact that such studies reflect the complexity of reality on the ground, they sometimes struggle to cope with entanglement of politics and religion. A state of affairs that is natural and even sought-after in Islam is seen from a Western perspective as a dangerous thing which needs to be avoided at all times. Therefore, even Gunning in his attempt to “humanize the other” appears to downplay the role of religion in movement’s decision making in order to show that Hamas’ leaders are

⁹ K. Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner’s Guide*, London – Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006, p. 7-8. Hroub defines the ‘ends’ as an “extent to which politics is ingrained in Islam, whereas the ‘means’ issue reflects the controversy on the use of violence to achieve the ‘ends’.”

¹⁰ Cf. M. Litvak, “Martyrdom is Life’: *Jihad* and Martyrdom in the Ideology of Hamas”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33 (2010): 716-734.

¹¹ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³ J. Gunning and R. Jackson, “What’s so ‘religious’ about ‘religious terrorism’?”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4.3 (2011): 369–388, available from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17539153.2011.623405> (15/6/2013).

capable of pragmatic decisions. Still, religiosity and pragmatism are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary -- they coexist and complement each other. Hence, Hamas can show adaptability with regard to new situations without any need to compromise on its religious principles.

4. Having said that, Gunning's studies can still be considered representative of a sensitive, balanced **approach based on fieldwork** which operates on empirical level and strives for sincerity but does not advocate the movement. Within this last category, we include all studies of a similar nature as described above, including works of anthropology, sociology or political science.¹⁴ They will serve as a main reference point for our attempt to describe how the Palestinian Hamas interprets the Islamic concept of martyrdom.

Since we seek to deploy the most comprehensive approach possible, we will use a combination of Islamic studies and sociology. To describe the concept of *jihad* and martyrdom in modern Islam we will draw on works by authors from the Muslim world as well as by Western scholars, among others by Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari, 'Ali Shari'ati, David Cook, Meir Hatina or Assaf Moghadam. The perspective of classical Islamic studies is very helpful for defining the doctrinal basis of the ideology of martyrdom in Islam but this approach fails to sufficiently explain why this very topic of all Islamic concepts occupies central position in the religious life of the Palestinian society. To be able to outline the reasons for wide popular support and legitimacy that this concept enjoys, we have to look at the realities on the ground. And this is where the sociological approach grounded in field research takes over.

¹⁴ Notably: Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*; Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*; K. Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestinian Studies, 2000; S. Mishal and A. Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000; 'A. Tamimi, *Hamas: A History from Within*, Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2007.

2. THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF *JIHAD*

2.1 *Jihad* -- Warfare or a Peaceful Spiritual Effort?

No Islamic sacred text provides us with a clear unambiguous explanation of the concept of *jihad*. A literal translation from Arabic may be “effort” or “striving”. In the Qur’an, the word is usually followed by the formula *fi sabil Allah* which means “in the way of God” or “in the path of God”.¹⁵ Yet how to describe the “striving in the path of Allah”? Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani, an important figure of the Iranian Islamic revolution and one of the foremost Shi’ite ideologists of modern *jihad*, explains the way of God as “the very path of the well-being and betterment of human society. It is the way of justice, truth, and human liberty.”¹⁶

As such, the concept allows for wide range of interpretations, varying from pure spiritual effort of combating one’s lower self to actual warfare. Apologists of Islam concerned with improving its image in the world would argue that the primary meaning of *jihad* is peaceful and solely spiritual. It is the believer’s life-long effort to be a good Muslim, to fight against his lower instincts and urges, and to actively oppose any kind of wrongdoing.¹⁷ Indeed, the term does not necessarily embrace violence but if we look at the historical context and the way it has been practiced, connotations to warfare are apparent.

In his *Understanding Jihad* David Cook argues that “the Qur’an does not support a completely nonviolent interpretation of jihad,” because most of the verses clearly refer to actual fighting.¹⁸ The military success of the emerging Muslim community is perceived as a miracle which attests to the divinity of Allah’s promise to lead them to victory. Evidence to the veracity of this promise may be found in the conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries which led to

¹⁵ M. Abedi and G. Legenhausen, “Introduction”, in M. Abedi and G. Legenhausen (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, North Haledon, N.J.: Islamic Publications International, 2005, p. 2.

¹⁶ M. Taleqani, “Jihad and Shahadat”, in M. Abedi and G. Legenhausen (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, North Haledon, N.J.: Islamic Publications International, 2005, p. 50.

¹⁷ See for example: L. Fatoohi, *Jihad in the Qur’an: The Truth from the Source* [Kindle file], Birmingham: Luna Plena Publishing, 2009.

¹⁸ D. Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2005, p. 32-33.

the great expansion of territory under the control of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*).¹⁹ This is not to suggest that Islam as a religion is of violent nature. The institution of *jihad* shall not serve expansion of territory as such or increasing material wealth. Additionally, *jihad* is not waged for the purpose of forced conversion or annihilation of unbelievers.

The armed *jihad* also has a strong spiritual meaning and encompasses the element of justice.²⁰ Apologists of the peaceful nature of *jihad* and its advocates alike see *jihad* as a “just struggle for freedom and human rights.”²¹ Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari, theologian, jurist, and another ideologist of the Iranian revolution, claims:

“Islam is a religion that sees its duty and commitment to be the formation of the society. Islam came to reform society and to form a nation. Its mandate is the reform of the whole world... Islam is the religion which covers all activities of human life... It came to organize a state and a government.”²²

The ultimate goal of *jihad* is thus creation and expansion of *Dar al-Islam* that would establish preconditions under which “just political and social order” can evolve and Islam can be spread for the benefit of all humankind.²³ Every Muslim is committed to fighting for justice, to fulfilling one of the basic Islamic concepts of *al-amr bi-l- ma'ruf wa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar* (enjoying the good and forbidding the wrongdoing); *jihad* can be understood as one way of doing so.²⁴ Therefore it is not viewed as an act of aggression but as a fight against oppression. One might say that this doctrine played a real part in the rapid spread of Islam during the first two centuries of its existence. Islam usually became the majority religion in the territories conquered by Muslim troops. *Jihad* has played an important role in the development of Islam and remains a central topic of Islamic theology and jurisprudence.²⁵

¹⁹ Fatoohi, *Jihad in the Qur'an* [Kindle file]; Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, p. 13.

²⁰ Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, p. 7.

²¹ Fatoohi, *Jihad in the Qur'an* [Kindle file].

²² M. Mutahhari, “Jihad in the Qur'an”, in M. Abedi and G. Legenhausen (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, North Haledon, N.J.: Islamic Publications International, 2005, p. 89.

²³ M. Knapp, “The Concept and Practice of Jihad in Islam,” *Parameters* 33.1 (2003): p. 83; See also M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 2.

²⁴ Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, p. 34-37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Islamic jurists distinguish between defensive and offensive *jihad*. Offensive *jihad* which is fought outside *Dar al-Islam* is a collective duty incumbent upon a Muslim community (*umma*) as a whole without a need for every individual's participation. It is meant as a last resort after the enemy refused either to convert to Islam or to pay a *jizyah* (poll-tax) and has to be authorized by a legitimate leader (although there are disputes between Sunnis and Shi'ites regarding the identity of the legitimate authority). Another important condition is proportionality. Muslim jurists generally agree that war itself is an evil which becomes justifiable only under the condition that it avoids an even greater evil. *Jihad* should ultimately aim to establish peace.²⁶

Defensive *jihad* applies when Muslim territory is attacked from outside. Unlike offensive *jihad*, it demands the involvement of every Muslim if not through actual combat then through financial contributions or prayers.²⁷ In case of foreign invasion, an individual does not need anyone's approval to join the *jihad*. As Islamic law has it, "a woman should go out even without the consent of her husband, a son can go too without the permission of his parent, a slave without the approval of his master, and the employee without the leave of his employer."²⁸ The *jihad* we experience today is legitimized as defensive. The rationale for this interpretation will be presented in the second section of the chapter.

We have demonstrated that at the times when Islamic community was expanding territorially, *jihad* was also understood as spiritual warfare. Non-violent spiritual interpretation of *jihad* became prominent only after the Islamic conquest lost its drive.²⁹ The notion of a spiritual fight against human lower instincts and passions was formulated by one of the greatest Islamic philosophers of all times -- Al-Ghazali -- and played an important role especially in mystical streams within Islam.³⁰

Nevertheless, armed *jihad* has never been forgotten. Throughout the history, Muslim lands were periodically in jeopardy as a result of the Crusades,

²⁶ Abedi and Legenhausen, "Introduction", p. 19-23.

²⁷ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, p. 2.

²⁸ "The Qaradawi Fatwas", *Middle East Quarterly* 11.3 (2004): p. 2.

²⁹ Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, p. 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Mongolian invasions and Western colonialist interests, respectively, and armed *jihad* gained new forms.

2.2 Evolution of the Idea and Contemporary Interpretations of Jihad

Notably, the invasions of Mongols were of a special importance for the contemporary ideology of *jihad*. Unlike Christian Crusaders, in this case the invaders were Muslims. Campaigning against them meant fighting Muslim brethren while tradition strictly forbade such a state of disruption within the *umma*. The Qur'an maintains that "*fitna* is worse than slaughter."³¹ *Fitna* means chaos or disunity, referring to the state of civil war which occurred after Prophet Muhammad's death and ultimately led to the Sunni-Shi'a split.³² The dilemma was resolved by Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya, a famous jurist, who branded Mongols as infidels on the grounds that instead of the *Shari'a*, they followed the legal code of Genghis Khan.³³ Ibn Taymiyya's rulings later served as a source of inspiration for other theorists on *jihad*, namely Sayyid Qutb, arguably the most prominent figure of contemporary *jihad*.

A new phase of the radical reinterpretation of *jihad* began with the establishment of Western dominance over the Muslim world during the 19th century. In reaction to decline of Muslim societies that were now in a subordinate position -- a state which is not inherent to Islam -- a new ideology called Salafism emerged at the turn of the 20th century with the goal of restoring Islamic glory of the past.

The Salafists represent a diverse revivalist movement. While there have always been reformists in the history of Islam, they were mostly individuals or very small groups. The revolutionary thing about the emergence of Salafists at the beginning of the last century was that part of them became political and had an ambition to penetrate state establishments and speak for whole countries.

All Salafist movements share a common religious creed but they differ in applying these religious beliefs and principles to contemporary issues and

³¹ Quoted according to: Abedi and Legenhausen, "Introduction", p. 22.

³² Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, p. 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

problems.³⁴ The core of the Salafi creed is the concept of *tawhid*, the unity of God. Salafists believe that God has created the whole universe in its perfection all at once. To maintain this perfection, one has to submit himself to God's guidance which is recorded in its pure form in the Qur'an and in *hadiths*, collections of stories and traditions believed to be uttered by the Prophet and members of his household. Hence, the only way to protect God's unity is to strictly follow the authority of the Qur'an and the personal example of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. According to Salafists, any other source of guidance beyond the Qur'an and *Sunna* leads Muslims away from the righteous path because it does not represent the original revelation. Any belief or action which is not mentioned in the Qur'an or *hadiths* is an innovation (*bid'a*) that threatens *tawhid*. For this reason Salafists also reject the authority of the official Sunni schools of jurisprudence because the supreme legislator is God as mentioned in the Qur'an. To legislate is a power reserved only for God, not for humans.³⁵ While humans may formulate regulations to guide their lives, these regulations can never be equivalent to God's law. But this notion is not restricted only to Islam. The idea that it is sin to substitute divine truth with man-made laws is common to Judaism and Christianity as well.

The next stage of the Salafi argument is that disobedience to the *Shari'a* in its entirety has caused the decadence of Islam and the supremacy of human-made laws over eternal divine justice. For Salafists, the Golden Age of Islam was the time of the Prophet Muhammad followed by *Rashidun*, the era of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs. These times were the times of the original and righteous *umma*, the times of the Pious Ancestors (*as-Salaf as-saleh*) and Muslim community as a whole is obliged to return to this authentic faith.³⁶ The very question of how to restore the genuine Islam is exactly the point where the individual factions of Salafism diverge. Different interpretations of the aforementioned religious precepts and their divergent applications to contextual reality have produced three major factions within the Salafi community.³⁷

³⁴ Q. Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006): p. 207.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208-209.

³⁶ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, p. 4.

³⁷ Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", p. 208.

The first strategy focuses primarily on promoting *da'wa* and advocates individual responsibility in spreading Islam. Its followers operate informally at the grassroots level and stay away from politics. They see their mission as an analogy to the Meccan period of Islam when the Prophet and his followers were a vulnerable minority and thus preferred propagation of a new faith to a rebellion. At that time the Prophet Muhammad and his nascent community were repressed but they remained peaceful for the sake of spreading Islam. This patient strategy aims at purification of religion and gradual transformation of the society into a righteous *umma*. Until this objective is achieved the followers should refrain from any engagement in politics, because a society that does not yet understand the religious principles is very likely to succumb to corruption or injustice if politically active.³⁸

One of the representatives of this Salafi faction is Muhammad Ilyas' movement Tablighi Jamaat founded in India in the 1920s. His disciples strictly and literally imitate the life of the Prophet, in the belief that through these everyday practices they can get rid of all bad habits as well as impious thoughts and behaviour. An example is that one "would sleep, if possible, just as tradition has it that Mohammed slept, lying on his right side on the ground, facing Mecca with his hand cupped beneath his cheek."³⁹ In order to eliminate as many bad influences as possible, they tend to isolate themselves from the rest of the society and break the bonds with the outer world.

Critics of this strategy argue that it has been unable to meet the needs and concerns of the people exactly because it prizes being out of touch with the world. That is why it has been challenged by another faction of the Salafists who believe the society must be changed by political means, through state organs. Political activism is inherent to Islam that understands itself as an all-encompassing guide for the life of the individual as well as the whole Muslim community. This strategy maintains the necessity of engagement in political arena, which is particularly important because it has a direct impact on social justice. By bringing about political reforms, social and political conditions can

³⁸ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, p.5; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", p. 217-218.

³⁹ G. Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, 4th ed., London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006, p. 44.

be established to create a true Muslim state based on *Shari'a* which is the only just system guaranteeing individuals absolute divine freedom. The decolonization of the Muslim world in the 20th century raised hopes that this dream might come true and seemed to promise the rise of Islamist states. However, instead of restoring Islamic law, the new Muslim leaders turned to secularism, nationalism, and the imitation of Western models. The feeling of disillusionment with the new rulers and their repression against these political activists convinced some of them that *da'wa* and political reforms are not viable strategies for the establishment of an Islamist state.⁴⁰

This brings us to the third strategy called Salafi-Jihad which does not believe in the possibility of changing the social order without taking violent action against those who threaten the *tawhid*. According to Salafi-Jihadists the society as a whole, including the fellow Muslims who do not obey the same rules, finds itself in a state of *jahiliyyah*. The term refers to the pre-Islamic period when humankind was ruled by its own ignorance and unbridled desire. Sayyid Qutb, one of the greatest ideologists of Salafi-Jihad, defines *jahili* society as

“any society other than the Islamic society; and if we want a more specific definition, we may say that any society is a *jahili* society if it does not dedicate itself to submission to Allah alone in its beliefs and ideas, in its observances of worship, and in its legal norms. According to this definition, all the societies existing in the world today are *jahili*.”⁴¹

Life within the *jahili* society is not possible for a faithful Muslim. He has to cut himself off of this rotten surrounding and join a “vanguard” of the few like-minded true Muslims. This vanguard is supposed to turn against the false Muslims and all the non-believers, undertake the renovation of Islam and found a new state, based on the Qur'an.⁴² Qutb argues:

“Islam cannot accept any compromise with *jahiliyyah*... Islam cannot accept or agree to a situation which is half-Islam and half-*jahiliyyah*... The mixing and co-existence of the truth and falsehood is impossible. Command belongs to Allah, or else to *jahiliyyah*.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, p. 6-7; Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, p. 208 and 225.

⁴¹ S.Qutb, *Milestones*, Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1993, p. 66.

⁴² P. Berman, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror”, *The New York Times*, March 23, 2003, available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-philosopher-of-islamic-terror.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (1/6/2012).

⁴³ Qutb, *Milestones*, p. 112.

Declaring those Muslims who do not share the same ideology to be idolaters or hypocrites, i.e. *takfiris*, gives the rationale for violent revolt against them without causing *fitna* within the Muslim community. As mentioned above, the Sunni tradition universally condemns any violence against fellow Muslims and maintains that even a bad ruler is still better than *fitna*. Nevertheless, the charge of *jahiliyyah* presents the justification for waging war on co-believers.⁴⁴ Secularist Muslim regimes, the Shi'ite branch of Islam, various mystic orders and other Islamic sects are all legitimate targets and according to this ideology their followers can be killed.

At the beginning, the Salafi-Jihad was oriented to the “near enemy” represented by domestic corrupted regimes. Salafi-Jihadists sought to overthrow local Muslim governments in order to establish an Islamist state. However, their strategy has changed over time. Especially after the Afghan war the problem started to be seen not as local but rather global and priority was given to tackling first the “far enemy” symbolized by the West, especially by the United States. The West was seen as controlling the countries of the Muslim world and local leaders were considered puppets of this global power.⁴⁵ For this reason they have to deal with the West first and domestic *kufir* comes afterwards.

Obviously, Salafi-Jihadis do not have any interest in politics because they do not recognize the legitimacy of the current social order or political system. For the same reason they do not encompass any social component such as charitable work or management of social institutions. They tend to be totally anti-systematic and focus solely on military operations. But they do not belong to local nationalistic movements fighting for self-determination like the Palestinian Hamas or the Islamic Jihad; instead, they see themselves as members of a transnational group. In their ideology they reject the concept of national boundaries, hence their battlefield is global and they have no particular interest in a Palestinian state.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, p. 7-8.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 17-19.

⁴⁶ “Radical Islam in Gaza”, *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report N°104, March 29, 2011, p. 6, available from: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/104---Radical%20Islam%20in%20Gaza.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/104---Radical%20Islam%20in%20Gaza.pdf) (2/12/2012).

Not having any ties with the society of outer world also means that they have no need to compromise on their radical and militant interpretation of religious symbols. Salafists who engage in politics and preaching *da'wa* are firmly based in the centre of the society they wish to occupy. In order to achieve this, they have to be moderate. Salafi-Jihadis are the exact opposite. They wish to distance themselves from society in order to attack it.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ “Radical Islam in Gaza”, *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report N°104, March 29, 2011, p. 6-7, available from: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/104---Radical%20Islam%20in%20Gaza.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/104---Radical%20Islam%20in%20Gaza.pdf) (2/12/2012).

3. INTRODUCTION OF THE NOTION OF *ISTISHHAD*⁴⁸

*Above every virtue there is another virtue, but there is no other virtue higher than being killed in the way of God.*⁴⁹

Prophet Muhammad

As we described in the previous chapter, Islam has placed an emphasis on power and fighting for a right cause in the path of God. Expressed in the words of Ayatollah Mutahhari, “the Muslim community is a community of power and force. Islam is a religion of power. It produces *mujahidin* [fighters on the path of God].”⁵⁰ With a few exceptions, Muslims have never been an oppressed minority and Islam has usually been in a superior position. This historical experience has created an image of martyrdom which is different from concepts in other monotheistic religions. In Islam, contrary to Judaism or Christianity, a martyr is not epitomized as being passively tortured to death but rather as taking a proactive role while seeking out death in the battlefield:⁵¹

“*Shahadat* is not a death which is imposed by an enemy upon our warriors. It is a death which is desired by our warriors, selected with all of the awareness, logic, reasoning, intelligence, understanding, consciousness and alertness that a human being can have.”⁵²

Thus, martyrdom has always been associated with *jihad*.⁵³

Similarly to Greek from which the word “martyr” originates, *shahid* (pl. *shuhada*) in Arabic means either “witness” or “martyr”, depending on the context. The root SH.H.D signifies “giving testimony (of faith)”-- the *shahada* -- which every Muslim utters in daily prayers by declaring that there is no god but

⁴⁸ *Istishhad* is an Arabic term for “martyrdom.” The Farsi variant of the word -- *shahadat* can be often encountered, too.

⁴⁹ Quoted according to: M. Mutahhari, “Shahid”, in M. Abedi and G. Legenhausen (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, North Haledon, N.J.: Islamic Publications International, 2005, p. 136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵¹ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 30.

⁵² ‘A. Shari’ati, “Shahadat”, in M. Abedi and G. Legenhausen (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, North Haledon, N.J.: Islamic Publications International, 2005, p. 194.

⁵³ In Shi’ism the perception of martyrdom is slightly different though. There the understanding of martyrdom resembles passivity since Shi’ites belong to the discriminated minority that has often suffered from assaults by the Sunni majority.

Allah, and that Muhammad is His Messenger.⁵⁴ Also, being martyred means to testify to the divinity of the cause for which the *shahid* fights.

The Qur'an does not contain any systematic conceptual idea of *istishhad*.⁵⁵ Occasional references to the subject are disorganized and often ambiguous, because Qur'an primarily uses the word "*shahid*" with the sense of "witness" while a martyr is referred to as someone "killed in the path of Allah."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Qur'an is clear about the fact that martyrs are entitled to special rewards:

"And do not think of those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well-provided for. Rejoicing in what their Lord has given them of His bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them, knowing that they have nothing to fear and shall not grieve." [Qur'an 3:169-170]⁵⁷

The close proximity to God and the opportunity to enjoy all pleasures of the paradise testify to the special status of a martyr that is associated with glory and high honor. The martyr is considered a special being encircled with the aura of sanctity. Islamic tradition maintains that the very first drop of martyr's blood washes off all his sins.⁵⁸ At the same time, such a heroic manner of death purifies not only the soul but the body, too. The body, blood and even the garments of the *shahid* become spiritualized because of the divinity of his sacrifice. Therefore, *shahid's* body, contrary to general rules, is not to be washed prior to burial and is laid down to the grave in the same blood-soaked clothes.⁵⁹ Reportedly, the bodies of martyrs even smell like paradise.⁶⁰

As indicated above, martyrdom is viewed as the most desirable means of death and the emerging Muslim community distinguished itself from other faiths by the number of believers who had no fear of death and deliberately sought to be martyred:

⁵⁴ Abedi and Legenhausen, "Introduction", p. 3.

⁵⁵ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 16.

⁵⁶ F. Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements Worldwide*, Boulder – London: Paradigm Publishers, 2009, p. 46.

⁵⁷ Quoted according to: Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 31.

⁵⁸ Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Mutahhari, "Shahid", p. 127.

⁶⁰ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 118.

“In the early days of Islam, many Muslims had a special spirit, which may be called the spirit of longing for *shahadat*... We find that during the early days of Islam everyone, whether young or old, high or low, had this longing. Sometimes the people came to the Prophet and expressed this desire. Islam does not allow suicide. They wanted to take part in *jihad*, and to be killed while doing their duty. They requested the Prophet to pray to God to grant them *shahadat*.”⁶¹

Nevertheless, the privilege to decide who is to be raised among the ranks of *shuhada* is bestowed upon God only.⁶² The most determining condition is the right intention of the combatant.⁶³ To concisely demonstrate what the right intention is, let us cite a short story from the life of the Prophet:

“A man asked the noble Prophet, ‘Messenger of God! [What is the reward of] a poor person who goes to the battlefield for the sake of booty?’ The Prophet repeated three times, ‘He has no divine reward.’ [Another person] asked the noble Prophet, ‘Is the one who goes to the battlefield in order to test his own courage or to see fame properly called *mujahid fi sabil Allah* (striver in the way of God)?’ ‘No!’ he replied. ‘Then who can properly be called *mujahid fi sabil Allah*?’ The Prophet answered, ‘[The one who strives so] that God’s word becomes the uppermost.’”⁶⁴

Yet, one cannot become *shahid* only by dying in the way of God. Becoming a *shahid* also requires leading the whole life of a responsible, active believer. *Istishhad* is only a culmination of such a responsible life. Sometimes, the only way to live a true and meaningful life is to die by choice when there is no other option.⁶⁵ But that is every believer’s responsibility to decide.

When the Muslim community became well established at the end of the 8th century and *jihad* started to be interpreted not only as fighting the enemy but also as fighting one’s lower self, this extension of the initial meaning had an impact on the definition of martyrdom as well. Out of the desire to enjoy the status of a martyr and the admiration connected to it, new categories of *istishhad* were developed.⁶⁶

Most of the additional categories have only little to do with actual warfare. Needless to list them all, we will give only a limited number of examples.

⁶¹ Mutahhari, “Shahid”, p. 132-133.

⁶² Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 33.

⁶³ Abedi and Legenhausen, “Introduction”, p. 21.

⁶⁴ Quoted according to: Taleqani, “Jihad and Shahadat”, p. 55; Cf. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 36.

⁶⁵ Whitehead and Abufarha, “Suicide, Violence, and Cultural Conceptions of Martyrdom in Palestine”, p. 396.

⁶⁶ Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, p. 27 and 31.

Besides more traditional categories like dying by drowning, giving birth, while seeking knowledge, or guarding the frontiers of Islam, there exist quite unusual definitions of martyrdom like dying of lovesickness or dying from washing oneself ritually in snow.⁶⁷

However, these new concepts have never overshadowed the respectability of the fighting martyr and also the jurists have never appeared to take these secondary definitions seriously into account.⁶⁸ A combatant who died in the battlefield with the intention to raise the Word of Allah has always been the epitome of martyrdom and never lost its prominence, re-emerging and gaining new momentums in the course of history. The disruptive Ibn Taymiyya's times of Mongol invasions were followed by the era of Western colonialism which brought new forms and interpretations; some of them we have introduced in the second chapter. Besides transnational Salafi-Jihad, a number of territorially-limited initiatives fighting for the local cause have turned up, the most outstanding of which are nationalistic movements in Palestine aspiring to the establishment of Palestinian statehood.

⁶⁷ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 34-35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

4. THE CASE OF PALESTINE

In all ages and centuries, when the followers of a faith and an idea have power, they guarantee their honor and lives with jihad. But when they are weakened and have no means whereby to struggle, they guarantee their lives, movement, faith, respect, honor, future and history with shahadat. Shahadat is an invitation to all generations, in all ages, if you cannot kill your oppressor, then die.⁶⁹

'Ali Shari'ati

The vanguards of Palestinian “popular armed struggle” against Israel were secular-nationalist movements that began to undertake military actions to liberate the land of Palestine in the late 1950s.⁷⁰ Led by Fatah, these secular movements were later unified in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At that time, the Arab world was dominated by socialism and pan-Arab nationalism. Palestine was no exception to these ideologies. Yet, despite the secular nature of the PLO, the terminology which it used in reference to its armed struggle against Israel was not divorced from religious terms and concepts. Even though the religious symbols were depleted of their sacred meaning, Islam has never ceased to serve as a source of collective identity and cultural values.⁷¹ In fact, the role of religion in the Arab political arena is often misconstrued. Islam and its language, logic, and moral understanding are not necessarily considered absolutely binding by all Muslims. The importance of Islam does not consist in the literal obedience to its religious dogmas. The socially crucial role of Islam rather lies in its ability to shape narrative as well as discursive and moral argumentation. When political or military leaders want to make a strong statement, they employ Islamic motifs. When leaders want to persuade their listeners that their arguments are morally sound, they make reference to Islam. They would invoke religiously charged terms, or refer to the Prophet or a Muslim saint, and combine these references with those related to politics, economics or other fields. The Islamic references attest to the leader’s honesty and commitment to the community rather than to his personal devotion or piety.

⁶⁹ Shari’ati, “Shahadat”, p. 214.

⁷⁰ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 37.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Nevertheless, the Arab nationalism began to lose its appeal after the 1967 war with Israel. Arab states suffered a serious defeat and people started to openly question the capability of the establishment to cope with the continuing decline of their societies. The Palestinian cause was no longer at the top of the agenda because the Arab regimes had to deal with burning issues at home. And as the disillusionment with secularism and modernism continued, Arab people turned back to religion that gave them refuge in those difficult times. Consequently, Islamist movements -- by that time suppressed by ruling elites -- started to emerge as a challenge to the secularist regimes; the 1970s betokened a mass revival of religious values.⁷² This dichotomy should not be seen as a duel between modern nationalism and old-fashioned religiosity. Islamist movements rather politicized their Islam and promoted communal welfare and solidarity, while opposing exploitation and imperialism represented by the Arab nationalism.

The revived religious sentiment also changed the narrative of the conflict with Israel. Palestinian Islamist movements like Hamas and the Islamic Jihad reintroduced the traditional symbols with their original religious meaning and firmly based the Palestinian cause in historical-religious context.⁷³ These movements soon became a powerful alternative to the PLO.

Within the religious discourse, the struggle against Israel has been interpreted as a defensive *jihad* and thus an individual obligation for every grown up, able-bodied male who is sane,⁷⁴ because the confrontation has been seen as threatening not only the Palestinian identity but also fundamental principles of Islam. This interpretation was partly due to political manipulation.

As we described above, Islam considers itself to be the only just system which corresponds with human nature and enables every individual to fully develop his capacities.⁷⁵ Once a believer submits himself to Allah's will, the very act

⁷² Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 27.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷⁴ W. Gawthrop, "Dogmatic Basis of Jihad and Martyrdom", *Small Wars Journal*, July 6, 2011, available from: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/dogmatic-basis-of-jihad-and-martyrdom> (9/7/2013).

⁷⁵ Abedi and Legenhausen, "Introduction", p. 8; Taleqani, "Jihad and Shahadat", p. 50.

raises within him a “passion for freedom.”⁷⁶ Having this passion, he is liberated from servitude, but is also prohibited from enslaving others.⁷⁷ As a result,

“oppression should never be given a chance to establish itself in society. A Muslim is supposed to be a conscientious individual responding with appropriate action to whatever injustice may be perpetrated in society, provided the chosen action does not produce a greater evil than the one it is directed against. A Muslim is thus a force for positive change, a citizen whose faith reinforces within him or her sense of responsibility to combat oppression.”⁷⁸

The responsibility for the welfare of the Muslim community is another fundamental aspect within Islam that is oriented much less individually in comparison to the Western culture. A righteous Muslim is ready to sacrifice his life for the benefit of the community in a selfless action whose ultimate objective is to reveal the truth and moral superiority of Islam.

High morals of Palestinians and devotion to the cause in contrast to the Israeli society are often praised. According to the Islamic tradition, Jewish people cling to life whatever the cost because they are afraid to die -- knowing that they would have to pay for all the sins they have committed.⁷⁹ The Qur’an says:

“Indeed, you will find of them [Jews] the most attached to life, even more attached than those who associated other gods with Allah. Every one of them wishes to live for one thousand years. This long life, however, will not spare them punishment.” [Qur’an 2:96]⁸⁰

Since Muslims consider themselves pious and faithful believers, they have nothing to fear, not even death. Being martyred is a direct path to the heavens hence there is no reason to cling to the worldly life. Yet, there is nothing ecstatic or otherworldly about martyrdom. A believer can only decide to be a martyr if he is a good person and if he has led a good life in this world. He cannot be passive and hope to die as a martyr. A believer has a responsibility in this world and he has to carry it out. Even to die for it if it is deemed necessary. Otherwise, he is not a true believer. Not martyrdom but this worldly responsibility is the heart of Islamic movements like Hamas. Martyrdom is only one moment which requires a whole responsibly lived life at the first place.

⁷⁶ Tamimi, *Hamas*, p. 178.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 178-179.

⁷⁹ Mutahhari, “Shahid”, p. 141.

⁸⁰ Quoted according to: Cook, David, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 23-24.

The combination of readiness to sacrifice one's life, moral obligation to forbid any wrongdoing, and the proactive nature of martyrdom in Islam -- which is a conscious and deliberate decision of the perpetrator -- has ultimately led to the justification of suicide missions as a form of self-sacrifice for the Palestinian cause and a legitimate means of warfare against Israel.⁸¹ As Meir Hatina argues, these "ideological foundations" were laid down by a manifesto bearing the name *Readings in the Laws of Martyrdom* issued and distributed in Palestine by the Islamic Jihad in 1988.⁸²

The Islamic Jihad together with Hamas have championed the suicide missions within the Sunni Islam and paved the way for the deployment of self-immolations by Salafi-Jihadists who, contrary to these local Islamist movements, perceive not only Western culture but also other Muslims and Muslim rulers as legitimate targets.⁸³ Suicide bombings are thus like a double-edged sword. Against the West they serve as a political tool -- a weapon against Western exploitation and imperialism. Within the Muslim world they represent a fundamentalist struggle for purity and supremacy of one version of religion over others.

Until the emergence of Salafi-Jihad on a global scale, suicide bombings were mostly used in the Shi'ite branch of Islam. Notably the Islamic Republic of Iran was renowned for its exaltation of martyrdom during the war with Iraq in 1980s. At that time it was fighting its enemy with an innovative weapon known as "human wave attacks":⁸⁴

"Each attack consisted of up to 20,000 children as young as twelve or thirteen who were sent into the line of fire and across minefields, with no backup. Exploding the mines with their own bodies, these children were used to clear the way for the soldiers who followed them. In return for their almost certain death, the children were provided with a plastic key that they wore around their neck. If they would die as martyrs, they were told, that key would open the gate to paradise."⁸⁵

⁸¹ M. Hatina, "The 'Ulama' and the Cult of Death in Palestine", *Israel Affairs* 12.1 (2006): p. 34.

⁸² M. Hatina, "Theology and Power in the Middle East: Palestinian Martyrdom in a Comparative Perspective", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10.3 (2005): p. 241.

⁸³ A. Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008, p. 104.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

The first bomb attack which implied death of the perpetrator occurred in 1981 in Beirut, Lebanon, where a pro-Iranian faction hit the Iraqi Embassy with a bomb-laden car. Subsequently, the tactic was mastered by Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shi'a militia, that committed a large number of suicide attacks against foreign troops in the country.⁸⁶ In 1992, when Israelis deported several hundred members of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad into the southern Lebanon, the Palestinians borrowed the know-how from their Lebanese brethren and soon after their return from Lebanese exile, they decided to use the suicide missions against Israel.⁸⁷

In the course of time, the “human bomb” became a symbol of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, especially during the second intifada.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the line between suicide and self-sacrifice was so blurred that Palestinians needed to seek the approval of religious authorities to win over popular support for martyrdom operations.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*, p. 20.

⁸⁷ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 65-66.

⁸⁸ A Palestinian popular uprising which started in 2000 and continued for almost next five years.

⁸⁹ Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 36.

5. THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING SUICIDE MISSIONS

*Do not call them suicide bombers; call them shuhada, as they have not escaped the miseries of life. Life is sacred, but some things, like truth and justice, are more sacred than life. The shuhada are not desperate, they are hopeful... The al-Aqsa Intifada is horrendous, and there have been many casualties, but the Palestinians are not complaining. They are the victims, and they have the right to fight. The Israelis have guns, we have the human bomb. We love death, they love life. ... Our history is made by blood and sweat.*⁹⁰

'Azzam Tamimi

Despite the common understanding of martyrdom in Islam described hereinbefore as proactive and deliberately chosen, legitimacy of suicide operations arouses many controversies within the Muslim world. Due to the lack of one central authority, Muslim sages have not been able to arrive at one generally binding decision which would solve the issue for good.

The first problem that divides the community of Muslim scholars, *ulama*, is the question whether to regard the bomber's blowing himself up as committing an act of suicide or as a conscious self-sacrifice.

The crucial factor for labelling the act one way or another is the intention of the perpetrator. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Sunni cleric and a supporter of martyrdom operations in Palestine drew the distinction between the two as follows:

“Suicide is an act or instance of killing oneself intentionally out of despair, and finding no outlet except putting an end to one's life. On the other hand, martyrdom is a heroic act of choosing to suffer death in the cause of Allah, and that's why it's considered by most Muslim scholars as one of the greatest forms of jihad.”⁹¹

The fact that bombers are not mentally-ill suicidal nihilists -- as was suggest by some Western observers in an attempt to explain the psychological motivation of the individual⁹² -- confirms also the leader of the Islamic Jihad:

⁹⁰ Quoted according to: Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 40.

⁹¹ “The Qaradawi Fatwas”, p. 1-2.

⁹² Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 29.

“We do not take depressed people. If there were [even] a one-in-a-thousand chance that a person was suicidal, we would not allow him to martyr himself. In order to be a martyr bomber, you have to want to live.”⁹³

Suicide operations constitute a new phenomenon which was made possible by the invention of easily transportable explosives.⁹⁴ As such, we find only few arguments in the traditional sources to either confirm or contradict the legitimacy of suicide missions. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that the final verdict is rather a matter of personal opinion which is often not free of personal sympathies and sentiments. And sometimes even political calculation plays its role. Given the ambiguous nature of the martyrdom operation and little relevance of the traditional texts to settle the existing controversy, the support for Palestinian martyrdom operations comes out more of solidarity with the Palestinian cause than of any other reason. As we have already indicated above, religion is part of everything in the Islamic world. Not in an “absolute” sense but in a way that it helps to shape all sorts of social and individual discourses, thus providing a meaningful narrative for many different situations. Suicide bombings in Palestine and their religious reasoning are only one of the examples.

According to al-Qaradawi, as the weapon of last resort, “martyrdom operations are legitimate [in Palestine] because the Palestinians have no other effective means of self-defence.”⁹⁵ But in other cases like in Iraq, suicide missions are not justifiable because Iraqis have other “resources with which to resist foreign occupation and [are] not obliged to employ martyrdom operations.”⁹⁶

Most of the *ulama* have followed this pattern and condemned al-Qaida as “an apostate footnote in the annals of Islamic history.”⁹⁷ Thus, religious legitimacy for suicide bombings has been territorially limited and granted to Palestinians on a case-by-case basis.⁹⁸

⁹³ Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 45.

⁹⁴ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 149.

⁹⁵ Tamimi, *Hamas*, p. 185.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Quoted according to: Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine,” p. 45.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Generally, advocates of suicide missions enumerate following arguments in their support (as listed off by Nawwaf al-Takruri in his famous book *Martyrdom Operations in the Legal Balance*):

- “They are a deterrent by means of causing terror among the enemy.
- They cause the highest number of casualties on the part of the enemy with the fewest number of casualties on the part of the Muslims.
- They equalize what would otherwise be unequal conflicts (such as that against Israel).
- They cause the Israelis to think twice before perpetrating crimes against the Palestinians.
- They cause happiness and fortitude to enter into the hearts of the Muslims, and despair to enter into their enemies.
- They give the Muslim community the spirit of *jihad* and martyrdom, and cause Muslims to focus upon fighters and martyrs as examples rather than other popular heroes or symbols.
- They bring non-Muslims to the knowledge of what is Islam.”⁹⁹

The gravity of the situation in Palestine was arguably the reason why the opposition to suicide operations confined to Palestine was relatively marginal among Muslim clerics.¹⁰⁰ In the face of overwhelming support for Palestinian martyrs, there has been a minority of *ulama* that opposed suicide attacks in principle, denouncing them as an evil method that contradicts fundamental principles of the Islamic faith. The contra-arguments usually put forward can be summarized as follows:

- The operations are plain suicide, sin which sentences the person to an eternal suffering in hell, because the bomber “kills himself by himself” even before killing the others, thus acting on behalf of God.
- Killing the innocent civilians, including children, women, and elderly people, or other Muslims who might be among the victims contravenes the Islamic laws of war.

⁹⁹ Quoted according to: Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

- Who is and who is not a martyr is known to God only and there is always the possibility that the bomber acted out of the desire for fame or material well-being of his family (which is usually compensated after the operation).
- Negative publicity surrounding suicide bombings harms and “dehumanizes” the Palestinian cause; their strategic value is therefore questionable.¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, those *ulama* who have condemned martyrdom operations in Palestine belong to the outcast minority. Yet, despite the major agreement on the legitimacy of suicide missions in Palestine, Muslim sages have explicitly emphasized the exceptionality of the Palestinian cause and disapproved the use of suicide missions by other groups.¹⁰² This again demonstrates the complex role of religion within the Muslim world. It is not a simple set of instructions which an adherent has to strictly obey. Martyrdom is a complex phenomenon and even its religious justifications are complex because they take into account individual interests and contexts -- since the Palestinians are in a special situation, they also deserve special justifications.

However, the support of *ulama* for the Palestinian cause not only served to the enhancement of religious aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but it involuntarily led to employment of the tactic in a massive scale by transnational Jihadist groups.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, p. 50; Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 153; Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 47.

¹⁰² Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 46.

¹⁰³ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*, p. 104.

6. HAMAS AND MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS

But at no time is the blood of a shahid wasted. It does not flow on the ground. Every drop of it is turned into hundreds of thousands of drops, nay into tons of blood, and is transfused into the body of his society. That is why the noble Prophet has said, "God does not like any drop more than the drop of blood shed in his way." Shahadat means the transfusion of blood into a society, especially into a society suffering from anemia. It is the shahid who infuses fresh blood into the veins of society. The distinctive characteristic of a shahid is that he charges the atmosphere with courage and zeal. He revives the spirit of valor and fortitude, courage and zeal, especially divine zeal, among the people who have lost it. That is why Islam is always in need of shuhada. The revival of courage is essential for the revival of a nation.¹⁰⁴

Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari

Martyrdom operations, in the Western academic discourse labelled as suicide terrorism, represent one of the distinctive features of contemporary radical Islam. In the course of previous chapters, we have explained the ideological background that bestows legitimacy upon Palestinian suicide bombings in the eyes of their perpetrators, Palestinian society, and also wider public arena of the Muslim world. However, the ideology itself is not sufficient to explain why the acts of suicide terrorism occur at this particular place in this particular time. It is due to the complexity of the phenomenon that requires complex, multidisciplinary approach. First of all, we have to take into consideration multiple levels of participants. Beyond personal participation, the complex web of suicide terrorism also involves organizations that make the decision whether or not to deploy this tactic and societies that respond to this decision.¹⁰⁵

The top of the pyramid is the **level of individuals** who decide to become the perpetrators of suicide attacks. Individuals are at the top of the pyramid not only in the terms of logistic but also because *istishhad* is ultimately a personal decision of a single individual. Analysts widely agree that determining the prototype of a suicide bomber is very difficult because personal motivations vary extensively. Moreover, the perpetrator often combines several motivations

¹⁰⁴ Mutahhari, "Shahid", p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ We draw on the three-level analytical framework defined by Mohammed M. Hafez in his piece *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006, p. 15. Hafez's three levels of analysis are: individual motivations, organizational strategies and societal conflicts.

simultaneously, among others the desire for vengeance, commitment either to the organization or to the community, and last but not least, the bomber might want to enjoy the rewards and benefits of being martyred.¹⁰⁶

There are only few characteristics that bombers have in common but those characteristics have little relevance to unravelling their individual motives. There is no real chance that the common traits could give us any clue. What we know is that the bombers are Muslims, usually in late teens or early twenties and unmarried. Yet, their social and educational background differs and sometimes they even come from outside the organization.¹⁰⁷

Since we were unable to conduct a field research, i.e. we did not speak to anyone who has planned to perpetrate an act of suicide terrorism, we are not qualified to make any assumption about personal motivations. Instead, we will focus on the two other levels which also play a part in adopting the tactic of suicide terrorism: **strategies of organizations** and **roles of societies** -- and especially how they intertwine.

At this stage, we have access to information through a lot of literature on life in Palestinian territories, Palestinian society and its grievances, and also the Hamas movement, its presence in Palestine and the way it thinks. We have introduced a short summary of literature on the subject at the beginning of the paper, showing how diverse the attitude toward Hamas can be. In accordance with our preliminary statement, we will draw on the works that are firmly grounded in field research and have regard for the realities on the ground. The entanglement of Hamas' policies with social norms will be in our main focus since Hamas does not exist in vacuum but is active within the Palestinian society. Hamas is a factor in shaping the Palestinian society as it is in effect subject to social influences. The movement has been growing within Palestine since its inception, operating on the grassroots levels. The very fact distinguishes Hamas from Fatah that resided outside Palestine for a large part of its history and supports the argument that to certain extent the movement's ideology reflects popular sentiments. Which is not to say that public sentiments are pro-death. It rather means that the society understands things in a complex

¹⁰⁶ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*, p. 255-258.

¹⁰⁷ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 24 and 12.

fashion, linking together personal devotion, politics, and socio-economics whereas martyrdom is only a part of the equation. To introduce the reader into the context, we will present a short overview of the movement's history at the first place.

6.1 Origins of the Movement

In its *Charter* issued in 1988, Hamas declares its affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), nowadays the most powerful Islamist movement of its kind that has branches throughout the Muslim world and is known as the “mother of all movements that comprise political Islam.”¹⁰⁸ The Muslim Brotherhood was established in 1928 in Egypt as a Salafist-reformist movement aimed at restoration of traditional Islamic values and liberation of the Muslim world from colonial domination.¹⁰⁹ Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, held the view that foreign presence in Palestine is a sign of a general deterioration of Islam and that armed struggle against the British and Israelis represents only a part of the effort to liberate the Palestinian people. Military activity has to go hand in hand with educating people toward Islam that would infuse the society with traditional religious values and make it morally steadfast.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, in the face of the British rule and increasing Jewish immigration to Palestine, the Brotherhood could not have stayed indifferent toward the Palestinian cause and soon it became the leading force behind the Palestinian resistance. The most prominent *mujahid* of those early years of the Brotherhood's struggle against foreign intruders in Palestine was 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam who engaged in assassinations of British officials and Jewish immigrants. Al-Qassam was eventually killed by British forces in 1935, thus becoming a symbol of resistance and personal self-sacrifice for the sake of nation.¹¹¹ Hamas sees itself as an extension of al-Qassam's effort to liberate the

¹⁰⁸ Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, p. 6-7.

¹⁰⁹ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Litvak, “Martyrdom is Life”, p. 717.

¹¹¹ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 16; cf. Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 11.

land of Palestine and out of respect to this figure, it named its military wing 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.¹¹²

Though the Muslim Brotherhood was present in Palestine even before the World War II, their first branch there was not officially opened until 1945. The new Palestinian Muslim Brothers instantly confirmed their “determination to defend the country by all means and [their] willingness to cooperate with all nationalistic bodies to that end.”¹¹³ They honoured their promise during the 1948 war from which Israel emerged victorious as an independent state. The loss of most of Palestine and division of the remaining land between Jordan and Egypt had a serious impact on the Brotherhood’s future development.¹¹⁴

Unlike Egypt that ruled the Gaza Strip, Jordan fully annexed the territory of the West Bank and the Palestinian MB merged with their Jordanian brethren into a single organization. They became a “loyal opposition” to the Jordanian king, avoiding confrontation with the regime that tolerated their activities in return.¹¹⁵ They exerted some political power but subordinated their Palestinian agenda to the King’s will. Instead of pursuing military efforts to liberate Palestine, the Brotherhood focused on educational activities and proselytizing, thus becoming subject to public critique for such behaviour.¹¹⁶

The Brotherhood in Gaza fell under the Egyptian rule. Egypt did not annex the Gaza Strip but it imposed military administration over the territory. Therefore, the Palestinian MB continued to form a separate organization there, although they had a close connection to their counterparts in Cairo. They were also governed in line with the Nasserist regime’s policy toward their Egyptian brethren. As a consequence, the 1954 crackdown by Nasser on the Egyptian MB constituted a serious blow for Gaza’s branch as well.¹¹⁷

Until then, the Gazan Brothers represented the “foremost political movement in the Gaza Strip” and engaged actively in military resistance.¹¹⁸ However, when they were pronounced illegal in the mid 1950s, they had to go underground and

¹¹² Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 11.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18; cf. Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 16.

¹¹⁵ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 28; Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 19-23.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 17.

¹¹⁸ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 23.

operate clandestinely. This unwelcomed development forced the movement to change its strategy of liberating Palestine. The Gazan Brotherhood decided to put off an open confrontation with Israel and give a priority to the non-violent part of liberating Palestinian land and the people.¹¹⁹ Their aim was to call to Islam by educating, proselytizing and conducting social activities. The MB called this process “preparing the generations” of Palestinians that would eventually be able to accomplish the mission of liberation.¹²⁰ They rationalized the choice to renounce violence by emphasizing the spiritual dimension of the conflict in Palestine, which led to their being accused of cowardice by some of their members who were keen to fight. Those members led by Khalid al-Wazir left the Brotherhood and set up a movement of their own which became known as Fatah.¹²¹

But Fatah forsook the religious ideology and embarked on secular nationalism. The newly born leftist movement took the head in military resistance against Israel on the grounds that Palestinians could not wait any longer for the Arab regimes to liberate their land but they had to take the initiative into their own hands.¹²² Fatah soon outpaced the Brotherhood in popularity and since then, it has been the most prominent adversary to Islamist parties in Palestine. The Brotherhood in Gaza tried to defend its position, arguing that the alternative is

“either to launch guerrilla warfare against Israel, as the PLO had done, using the same individuals who had grown up under regimes and ideologies distant from Islam -- so that one is doomed to repeat the errors of the past; or to launch a comprehensive effort at cultural renaissance designed to instill true Islam in the soul of the individual and, following that renaissance, to embark on the path to liberation.”¹²³

However, to re-emerge as a powerful political player they had to wait until the 1970s.

The window of opportunity opened again in 1967 when Israel took control over the Palestinian territories. The Brotherhood did not immediately change its strategy of passive resistance by calling people back to Islam but it benefited

¹¹⁹ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 25-28.

¹²⁰ Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, p. 14.

¹²¹ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 27-28; Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 25-28.

¹²² Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 27.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

from the new situation. Contrary to the Nasserist Egypt, Israel enabled the Islamist movement and its activities to flourish, considering it a non-violent opposition to leftist militants. The ties and cooperation between the Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank were renewed again.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, the MB in the Gaza Strip stood at the forefront and Gaza became the stronghold of the Brotherhood and later of the Hamas movement as well.¹²⁵

Until the 1980s, the social and institutional infrastructure of the Brotherhood grew extensively under the supervision of Gazan MB's spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. Grave socio-economic conditions and atmosphere of growing religiosity among people created right conditions for the Brotherhood's appeal as an alternative to secular leftist ideologies.¹²⁶ The most important milestone of the MB's activity in the Gaza Strip was the establishment of the Islamic Centre (al-Mujamma' al-islami) in 1973, that

“became the base for development, administration, and control of religious and educational Islamic institutions in the Gaza Strip... The Mujamma' followed the MB's traditional practice of applying the Islamic duty of charity (*zakat*) to the poor as a central avenue for social infiltration and expansion of its public support among the needy. The movement set up kindergartens and schools, a blood bank, medical clinics, vocational education centers for women, and youth and sport clubs. All these activities revolved around the mosque, combining worship, education, and social welfare with subsidized services such as medical treatment, children's day care, free meals, and sport clubs.”¹²⁷

The position of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood was further strengthened in 1982 when Israeli troops expelled the PLO from southern Lebanon where it relocated its headquarters after it had been forced out of Jordan in 1970. The defeat of the PLO in Lebanon left the organization “militarily and politically bankrupt.”¹²⁸ As a result, it shifted its focus “from military to political action.” This development aroused feelings of hopelessness among the Palestinians who had thought that a change was going to come.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 18.

¹²⁵ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 31.

¹²⁶ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 18-19.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19-20.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33

¹²⁹ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 36.

Yet, at the beginning of the 1980s the monopoly of the Muslim Brotherhood over the religious life in Palestine was challenged by the creation of the Islamic Jihad -- a splinter group of the MB founded by those Brothers who protested over its refusal to join military struggle against Israel alongside with the leftist movements.¹³⁰ Now the Brotherhood found itself in even worse situation than at the time when Fatah split off because the Islamic Jihad did not trade off its religiosity for the sake of armed resistance -- it rather “constituted a marriage between Islam and the gun; it was a way of engaging in resistance activities in the armour of an Islamic identity.”¹³¹ But contrary to the Brotherhood, Islam of the Islamic Jihad was never communal or people-based. The Islamic Jihad is not committed to social welfare, it is exclusively a fundamentalist militant operation committed to fighting Israel. In this sense, the Muslim Brotherhood’s concern with the well-being of the community remained unchallenged.

The relative weakness of the opposition and rising call for military action against Israeli occupation among their younger members gradually made the Brotherhood undergo a strategic shift and slowly embark on military resistance against Israel,¹³² thus equating the aim of re-Islamizing the society with the goal of liberating the land of Palestine.¹³³ In 1983 the Palestinian Muslim Brothers started to systematically prepare for an open armed confrontation and when the popular rebellion in 1987 suddenly erupted, they were ready to join the intifada. A new “strong arm” of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood was set up for that purpose and named Harakat al-muqawama al-islamiyya. It got to be known under its acronym “ Hamas”.¹³⁴ Khaled Hroub explains the connection between the outbreak of the first intifada and the creation of Hamas as follows:

“In a sense, the joint eruption of the intifada and emergence of Hamas was the culmination of two parallel, but not separate, curves of changes, one national and other partisan. While the first reflected the general Palestinian mood toward the deadlock that was facing their national cause, the second represented the increasing consciousness of resistance and confrontation among the Palestinian Islamists.”¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 32.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 37.

¹³³ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 36.

¹³⁴ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 34-35.

¹³⁵ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 36.

6.2 Hamas' Strategy and Logic behind the Use of Suicide Missions

In this section, we will try to demonstrate the complexity and multifocal nature of the suicide terrorism by using the Palestinian Hamas as an example of complex justifications for those acts, justifications that are derived from specific social, political, and socio-economic realities on the ground. At the same time, we will try to present the view from within Hamas, how the movement sees itself and what logic it uses to justify its behaviour.

To begin with, Hamas' strategy goals are concisely expressed in the movement's self-written *Introductory Memorandum* which dates back to 1993:

“Based on our understanding of the struggle with the Zionist enemy, who is associated with the Western Project to bring the Arab Islamic *umma* under the domination of Western culture, to make it dependent on the West, and to perpetuate its underdevelopment, and being aware of the complexities of the international and regional environment with the clear imbalance of power favoring the Zionist-American alliance, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) bases its strategy of resisting the Zionist settler occupation of Palestine on the following:

1. The Palestinian people are the direct target of the Zionist settler occupation. Therefore, they must bear the main burden of resisting the unjust occupation. This is why Hamas seeks to mobilize the full potential of the Palestinian people and channel it into steadfast resistance against the usurper.
2. Palestine is the terrain for confrontation with the enemy. The Arab and Islamic countries are regions from which our Palestinian people can draw support, particularly political, informational, and financial support; but the bloody confrontation with our Zionist enemy must take place on the sacred soil of Palestine...
3. There must be incessant resistance to and confrontation with the enemy in Palestine until we achieve victory and liberation. Jihad for the cause of God is our objective in that confrontation. The best method of resistance is to do battle with the soldiers of the enemy and destroy their armor.
4. It is in our view that political action is one of the means for pursuing jihad against the Zionist enemy. Its objective should be to strengthen the endurance of our people in their jihad against the occupation; to mobilize the forces of our people and our *umma* in defense of our cause; to defend the rights of our people; and to present their just cause to the international community.”¹³⁶

As indicated in the *Memorandum*, Hamas maintains that the best method of warfare is fighting “the soldiers of the enemy.” Yet, soon after publishing the

¹³⁶ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 48-49.

Memorandum it resorted to violence against civilian population inside Israel using “human bombs,” a controversial strategy that would -- contrary to Hamas’ proclaimed aims -- not only ruin the movement’s image at the international stage but also harm the legitimacy of the Palestinian struggle for statehood. This seeming contradiction is another example of Hamas’ multifaceted nature and its ability to encapsulate ostensibly incompatible policies.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that Hamas uses suicide missions thoughtlessly or that Hamas’ activists blow themselves up out of religious fanaticism without taking into consideration possible consequences of such deeds. We again arrive at the point where it is necessary to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon. First of all, religion does not lead to violence or suicidal behaviour *per se*; it is only a certain way of interpreting religious dogmas that defines the use of suicide attacks as a means of warfare. However, appropriate conditions are needed for this particular interpretation to become public opinion. God’s law does not dictate to a person to commit a suicide for His sake. Life is the most sacred value and can be sacrificed only as a last resort when there is no other option left. If there are any other weapons on disposal they should be used preferentially. The same goes for attacking civilians -- the religion prohibits killing children, women or elderly people, yet taking up arms against them can be justifiable under exceptional circumstances: when they participate in a war by providing either material or moral assistance, and when the harm on them is inevitable because they are either used as human shields or are indistinguishable from soldiers.¹³⁷ The matter of exceptionality in using suicide attacks against civilians was also pointed out by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, in an interview with Anat Berko:

“*Yassin*: According to our religion, a man must make sure to distance himself from innocent children and women and old men. It is forbidden by Islam to kill them or harm them, but in war things happen that contradict [religious] principles... [Sometimes there are] mistakes, for example, Israel in the [first] war in south Lebanon killed 100 people, and weren’t they civilians? That is, either by mistake or in retaliation, one thing for another. You kill children, you kill women, I take my revenge and by defending myself I pay you back, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That’s what happens in war and that means that for us a warrior kills

¹³⁷ Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 44.

his enemy to settle the score, not to kill women and old men, but the minute he sees his sister was killed, his mother or his father, he wants to cause the same deaths the enemy caused him....

Author: So then he is not obeying a religious commandment, he is taking revenge according to his own private criteria?

Yassin: No, not his criteria. Islam gave him clear instructions, but if you conspire against me, then I conspire against you. Allah said, if someone does something to hurt you, respond in the same way and hurt him.

Author: Is that written in Qur'an?

Yassin: Of course. If you are injured, respond in the same way you were injured. But there is a stage higher than that where the Qur'an says it is preferable to be restrained and patient, etc., and leave the matter in the hands of Allah. That is, patience and leaving the matter to Allah is a higher level.

Author: Honorable sheikh, we have seen the recent attacks, which were carried out on buses and were not the response of a victim who sought revenge the same way he was hurt, but of people who planned a series of attacks which were similar to one another. Isn't that a well-thought out policy, a policy of premeditation, of people who didn't choose the option of patience and waiting, but decided to attack civilians on buses? In your opinion, is that the proper response, to kill civilians on public transportation?

Yassin: That goes back to what we said before, because during the intifada, you see your mother die, your brother, your sister, and you control yourself, you are restrained, for a year or two, three, and that's enough. Your heart awakens and suffers more and more and then it's enough, your heart can't bear any more, it's the chain of behavior of the Israeli army and the occupation, the accumulated response of actions against it.

Author: That is, those actions are the correct response, ideologically and religiously, to the series of Israeli actions against Arabs, which in your view was the justification for the attacks carried out in Israel.

Yassin: You call it "the correct response." You are not speaking the truth. It is not the correct response, but rather an extraordinary response. That is, an exceptional situation, an emergency in view of the existing situation. That is not the source, because [the act] is forbidden at the source, because children and women, old people, civilians, conspiring against them is forbidden at the source, and if you act against them it is an exceptional act, and not genuine. It is not the correct solution, but rather an irregular action."¹³⁸

In line with the Qura'nic teaching of reciprocity about "an eye for an eye", Hamas has usually interpreted the suicide attacks as a response to killing of

¹³⁸ A. Berko, *The Path to Paradise: The Inner World of Suicide Bombers and Their Dispatchers*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2009, p. 56-57.

Palestinian civilians.¹³⁹ Until 1994, Hamas followed its statement in the *Memorandum* and confined its armed struggle to the military targets only. However, when the Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein shoot to death 29 Palestinians in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron in February 1994, Hamas dispatched its very first human bomb in retaliation for the massacre of worshipers.¹⁴⁰ The movement's policy of reciprocity in employing suicide attacks was articulated by Khalid Mash'al, the political leader of Hamas, in one of the interviews for a Canadian TV channel:

“We took the initiative more than ten years ago to propose sparing civilians on both sides of the conflict. We said we were prepared to stop the martyrdom operations, provided Israel also stops killing civilians including women, children and the elderly and stops destroying homes. Should Israel stop, we would be ready to stop. But Israel refused.”¹⁴¹

In the same TV interview, Khalid Mish'al also explains that the reason for employing martyrdom operations lies in the conviction that Palestinians have no other alternative to effectively resist the oppression and to defend themselves from the violence inflicted upon them. Therefore their extreme situation calls for extreme solutions:

“Martyrdom operations are an act of legitimate self-defense forced on us because the battle between us and Israel is not between equal sides and because the Israeli occupation has not left our land and no one has done us justice. We do know that ... many sympathizers [with the Palestinians] around the world do not understand the issue of the martyrdom operations which may prompt them to reconsider their sympathy. However, we ask, 'what is the alternative?' There is no alternative. Had the Palestinians people found the alternative they would have done without the resistance and without the martyrdom operations.”¹⁴²

Thus, the gravity of the situation in Palestine allows Hamas to build on the religious, cultural and historical memory of the Palestinians for a pursuit of its interpretation of Islam. Yet, this interpretation is neither rigid nor unchanging. It is subject to pragmatic calculations and adaptations to new conditions. The same Khalid Mish'al, who several years ago defined martyrdom operations as

¹³⁹ Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁰ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 246.

¹⁴¹ Quoted according to: Tamimi, *Hamas*, p. 165.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

the only alternative left for Palestinians, has now been endorsing popular non-violent resistance over armed struggle.¹⁴³

Many studies suggest that Hamas uses suicide missions instrumentally as a powerful tactic of warfare that is capable of inflicting a lot of damage at minimum cost. In fact, this coldly rational deliberation is yet another level of policy calculations incumbent upon an organization with scarce resources which operates clandestinely. Under such circumstances, the unconventional nature of human bombs counterbalances the strategic disadvantage on the part of the underprivileged group.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, by employing suicide bombings during the second intifada, Hamas and other Palestinian factions achieved certain parity in the numbers of victims among Israelis in comparison to the deaths of Palestinians -- contrary to the striking imbalance in the figures in the past.¹⁴⁵ Yet, suicide attacks not only compensate for the technological underdevelopment and lack of resources but also have a strong psychological impact on the public that was hit by suicide terrorism. Beyond dispersing fear and feelings of insecurity among Israelis, Hamas wants to turn Palestine into the land which is repelling to Jewish population in order to disrupt “the structure of Zionist society,” to abort Jewish immigration programs from abroad as well as tourism.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the Israeli public is not the only recipient of the message that the suicide attacks are meant to deliver.

At the opposite receiving end is the Palestinian society. We have demonstrated above that Hamas is concerned with the well-being and betterment of the community. Since the movement perceives political activity as a way of achieving this, it is naturally interested in public opinion. Hamas is a product of the Palestinian society; it is not the al-Qaeda which pursues its political and religious goals no matter what, without any interest in social welfare. Hamas seeks out public support for its policies including suicide operations. Yet, it would not be plausible to argue that Hamas gains electoral support by covertly

¹⁴³ H. Sherwood, “Arab Spring uprisings reveal rift in Hamas over conflict tactics”, *The Guardian*, January 6, 2012, available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/06/arab-spring-hamas-rift-gaza> (30/07/2013).

¹⁴⁴ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁶ Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 247.

brainwashing the Palestinian population as a number of analysts believe.¹⁴⁷ The act of martyrdom has to be communicated to the target group, whereas the audience has to be responsive to that particular narrative. This is not to argue that the Palestinian society possesses collective suicidal tendencies or that it embraces death over life. The communication is rather based on the fact that culturally and historically the society perceives martyrdom as an integral part of warfare. Hence, the crucial condition for an act to be accepted as martyrdom is an audience that shares the same system of values as a communicator:¹⁴⁸

“Ability to advertise the cause of the martyr is the crucible upon which the effective martyrdom narrative is to be judged. In reading over history’s rejected narratives, the reasons for their failure become clear. These reasons include insufficient pathos, inability to communicate or connect with the audience, an unreceptive audience or an inappropriate time for a given theme of martyrdom. Sometimes martyrdom narratives fail to be effective because the market is saturated with blood and gore, too jaded to be shocked, or unable to identify with the situation portrayed in the narrative. Thus, while there are many martyrs to be found in history, few are chosen to be representative of a given moment, belief system or people.”¹⁴⁹

We have shown how strongly the Islamic values are incorporated into the collective identity, and how important role the religion plays in social and cultural terms. And one of the Hamas’ aims is to even strengthen the societal role of Islam. Despite the emphasis on martyrdom as one of the main religious features, Hamas primarily understands Islam as a regulator of a functional, vital society. Islam fulfils a great deal of constructive roles within the society and should not be reduced to an ideology leading to death.

In the movement’s view, *jihad* and Islamization go hand in hand and complement each other. This goes back to the Muslim Brotherhood’s policy of multiple goals of pursuing *jihad* against imperialists and reviving Islamic values, as we have already described in the previous section. Hamas has continued in this tradition and maintained that for the Palestinians to be able to resist the corruptive impacts of the occupation they have to be morally and spiritually steadfast, hence its interest in communal welfare and *da’wa*. At this point we should stress again that Hamas does not run its social network in order

¹⁴⁷ See for example: E. Alshech, “Egoistic Martyrdom and Hamas’ success in the 2005 Municipal Elections: A study of Martyrs’ Ethical Wills, Biographies, and Eulogies,” *Die Welt des Islams* 48 (2008): p. 23.

¹⁴⁸ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, p. 219.

¹⁴⁹ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 3-4.

to breed crowds of suicide bombers who would be willing to die for Hamas' ideology. Spiritual and moral values are meant to infuse one's life with a deep, inner meaning. In this sense, *jihad* is a part of a responsible life and martyrdom is the culmination of life lived meaningfully. Presumably only those who are concerned with justice and state of affairs in their community would be ultimately willing to sacrifice their own life for the communal well-being. This aspect is especially important in the case of the Palestinians who stand at the forefront of the struggle with the enemy. They often refer to themselves as *murabitun*, i.e. "inhabitants of the frontier", who defended the borders of the land of Islam during the time of Muslim conquest.¹⁵⁰ Thus, it is believed that their devotion to the cause and selflessness are the most powerful assets in the fight against the enemy. A fragment of a Hamas' leaflet that was distributed among Palestinians during the first intifada demonstrates the emphasis on this particular narrative:

"The hundreds of wounded and tens of martyrs who sacrificed their lives during the week for the sake of Allah and for the sake of the pride and honor of the nation, for the sake of restoring our rights in the homeland, for the sake of hoisting the banner of Allah over the land -- are a correct expression of the spirit of sacrifice and selfless devotion with which our people is imbued, and demonstrated to the world that a people that is ready to sacrifice its life will not die.

The Jews must understand that despite their restrictions, their prisons, and detention camps, and despite our people's suffering in the shadow of the criminal occupation, and despite the torrents of blood that flow daily, despite the wounds, our people is great in the capacity to suffer and to be steadfast in the face of their arrogance and despotism, greater than their patience. Let them know that our sons and youngsters will stand firm in the face of their policy of violence, for they love [the promised] paradise more than our enemies love the life of this world.

The uprising of our *murabit* people in the occupied land is an act of defiance against the occupation and the pressures, against the policy of dispossession of the land and the planting of the settlements, against the Zionist policy of oppression. The uprising is meant to arouse the conscience of those who run after the anemic peace, after empty international conferences, after bad unilateral compromises like Camp David. Let them know well that Islam is the solution and the alternative!

Let the contemptuous settlers know that our people is set in its way -- the way that entails martyrdom in a holy war and the way of sacrifice.

¹⁵⁰ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 53.

Our people is known for its self-sacrifice. The policy of the military and of the settlers will be of no avail, and all their efforts to eradicate our people will fail, despite their bullets, their agents, and their humiliations.

Let them know this: violence begets violence, murder breeds murder, and he was right who said:

‘The drowning person is not afraid to get wet.’

And to the criminal Zionists!

Remove your hands from our people, our cities, our camps, and our villages! Our struggle against you is a struggle of faith, existence, and life.

Let the world know that the Jews have perpetrated Nazi crimes against our people, and that they will yet drink from the same cup.”¹⁵¹

‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Rantisi, one of the founding fathers of Hamas, expressed a similar view on the importance of self-sacrifice for the endurance of the Palestinian society. According to al-Rantisi,

“the culture of martyrdom ... ‘distinguishes the Palestinian people’ from others, and represents the strongest weapon the Palestinians possess, which no one can defeat or take away from them. It is not an imported weapon and it does not require foreign experts to operate, but it emerged from the depths of Palestinian soul, suffering and heroism. Thanks to it and in contrast to the past, the Palestinians are now able to control and direct the course of events. Rantisi credited the success of Palestinian resistance not to weapons or numbers but to the fact that those who were ready to die prevailed over those who feared death, and he observed that nations which acquire honor in history do so through death.”¹⁵²

It should be noted that the culture of martyrdom is not the same as the culture of death. Martyrdom is not craving for death; martyrdom is craving for a meaningful life. In compliance with the tradition, *shuhada* are not dead, they live with Allah and their deed is believed to have a vitalizing effect on the society and creating a new life¹⁵³ because

“like the heart, a *shahid* sends his own blood into the half-dead body of the dying society, whose children have lost faith in themselves, which is slowly approaching death, which has accepted submission, which has forgotten its responsibility, which is alienated from humanity, and in

¹⁵¹ S. Mishal and R. Aharoni, *Speaking Stones: Communiqués from the Intifada Underground*, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994, p. 230-231.

¹⁵² Litvak, “Martyrdom is Life”, p. 724.

¹⁵³ Whitehead and Abufarha, “Suicide, Violence, and Cultural Conceptions of Martyrdom in Palestine”, p. 401.

which there is no life, movement, and creativity. The greatest miracle of *shahadat* is giving to a generation a renewed faith in itself.”¹⁵⁴

This way, the act of *istishhad* plays a social role, is charged with cultural and popular meaning and thus “collectively significant” for the whole community.¹⁵⁵

Under particular conditions the particular religious concept can be activated to support the cause. If a nation perceives itself in a marginalized position and feels that its security, identity, and even the very existence are put in danger, it is very likely that it will recourse to a radical ideology. The Palestinians see themselves as victims of unjust treatment who are subject to disproportionate use of force by Israeli military, which they have no resources to contest against.¹⁵⁶ In this situation, the suicide operations are a “symbolic empowerment” of a dying nation, they give the forceless people a feeling of strength, they symbolize “the ability of the weak to resist the strong.”¹⁵⁷ Due to martyrdom operations, the Palestinians become the masters of their fate again, because it is only them who are responsible for their own death that is an “expression of independence that is long sought and denied.”¹⁵⁸ Their selflessness serves a higher principle and their self-sacrifice gives the nation courage and keeps it alive.

This narrative is also supported by the Palestinian and Arabic media in general which naturally leads to ratcheting the popular sentiments up.¹⁵⁹ On the top of that, no official authority has ever denounced this kind of violence in a serious manner. We have shown above that religious authorities across the Middle East largely supported the suicide bombings as a legitimate means of Palestinian self-defence in the face of Israeli military superiority. The Palestinian Authority alike did not condemn the suicide operations, although it was in the position of doing so.¹⁶⁰ What is more, Yasser Arafat’s ruling faction Fatah indirectly

¹⁵⁴ ‘A. Shari’ati, “After Shahadat”, in M. Abedi and G. Legenhausen (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, North Haledon, N.J.: Islamic Publications International, 2005, p. 248.

¹⁵⁵ Whitehead and Abufarha, “Suicide, Violence, and Cultural Conceptions of Martyrdom in Palestine”, p. 398-400.

¹⁵⁶ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 57-59.

¹⁵⁷ Hatina, “The ‘Ulama’ and the Cult of Death in Palestine”, p. 35.

¹⁵⁸ Whitehead and Abufarha, “Suicide, Violence, and Cultural Conceptions of Martyrdom in Palestine”, p. 404.

¹⁵⁹ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, p. 61.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

participated in this very kind of violence via its military arm called Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, partly in an attempt to stand to the growing popularity of Islamist groups like Hamas that were gaining electoral support by carrying out suicide campaigns.¹⁶¹ Secular factions like Fatah or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine did not have a problem with using the same rhetoric as Islamic movements and referring to the suicide bombers as *shuhada*, because Islam serves as a source of cultural and social identity, as we argued in the previous chapters.

To sum up, the combination of popular feelings of victimization, injustice, and in-proportionality of the conflict, the formidable economic situation, the continuing cycle of violence, along with Hamas' commitment to the community, and its radical understanding of the politics of the struggle, creates perfect conditions for the organization to promote its version of Islam and its interpretation of religious believes. And more importantly -- they are successful in gaining popular support for it.

¹⁶¹ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*, p. 36.

CONCLUSION

In the course of the paper, the prime objective was to demonstrate the multifocal nature of suicide terrorism and the need to see things from multiple perspectives while studying on the subject. Religion and religious concepts like martyrdom are sometimes seen as very simple but the opposite is true. Religion within the Islamic world cannot be understood as a set of absolute truths that are binding in their literal sense. Islam rather serves as an omnipresent source of all sorts of narratives and provides a platform in which reasoning for a particular action can be placed.

Martyrdom is a phenomenon which embodies these complexities. It is a climax of death and a celebration of life. Some of its perpetrators see it as a weapon of utmost destruction. Others see it as an ultimate expression of activism and protest. The act of martyrdom is grounded in such interlocking context. It may provide livelihood for the family of a *shahid* while exacting a heavy price from his family and community at the same time.

In the history of Islam, martyrdom has always been looked at as the most desirable way of death. Dying as a martyr reflects the devotion of a believer to the cause and his readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the well-being of his community. As a meritorious act, martyrdom should be actively sought out; it is not understood as being imposed passively upon a believer. *Istishhad* is rather a deliberate decision of a Muslim who is a responsible member of a community and has no other option left to uproot a wrongdoing which takes place in his society.

In this sense, martyrdom shall not be seen as a celebration of death because there is a lot of life in it. Through a religious perspective, martyrdom is an act of living, a product of life lived meaningfully and responsibly. As such, martyrdom brings to the forefront the dimensions of religion and religiosity often considered separate from it. Culture, history and economics manifest prominently in the practice and ideas of religion in the Middle East. Examining a phenomenon as “religious” solely through the perspective of scriptural texts misses much with regard to religion’s motivating and organizing powers.

The commitment to a responsible life is one dimension of Hamas' complex dynamics. On the grassroots level, the movement runs an extensive network of social services that cannot be reduced to a tool "in the service of jihad"¹⁶² or an instrument of political opportunism. We have also disproved the assumption that Hamas gains popular support through brainwashing of the Palestinians with the aim to recruit prospective suicide bombers. To be able to promote the cause of the martyr, Hamas (or any other Palestinian faction) has an essential need in audience responsive to that particular narrative. The act of martyrdom expresses certain cultural values that have significance not only for the perpetrator but also for the wider public which shares similar system of values. This is an important precondition that in combination with other factors makes such narrative attractive to a number of Palestinians.

Although the martyrdom operations in Palestine enjoy a massive support, Islamic jurists have not arrived to a definite verdict whether these self-immolations indeed represent an act of self-sacrifice or whether they are mere suicides. What is seen legitimate in Palestine is not allowed in other places like Iraq where the prevailing conditions are different. This fact again points out to the societal role of Islam that takes into account different contexts.

Another problematic issue of martyrdom missions from the juridical point of view is the matter of targeting civilians. Islamic law of warfare forbids killing of children, women and elderly people. However, under specific circumstances, exceptions exist even to this strict prohibition. Since the Palestinians perceive themselves in an impasse as victims of an aggression with no resources to resist the adversary, suicide missions which claim lives of civilians are deemed to be a legitimate means of self-defence. Again, contexts and interests matter.

Hamas is a political Islamist movement which operates on the grassroots level within the society. As such, it has to be responsive to the society's needs and demands, not like global Salafi-Jihadists who isolate themselves from their own communities because they deem themselves to be the only practitioners of the pure Islam. And despite the recent development in Egypt which has brought the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power, political Islam is on the rise

¹⁶² As M. Levitt argues in his book *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*.

and will continue to shape regional and global politics in the years to come. Thus, it cannot be reduced to fundamentalism on the one hand or political calculation on the other. Rather, it must be recognized as a phenomenon full of depth and complexity.

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