



Symposium: The Role of Ideology in the Conduct of Islamist Actors

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Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, reopened the debate on the role of revolutionary ideological conceptions in the decision-making of radical Islamic actors. On November 6, 2024, the Institute for National Security Studies held a symposium to discuss lessons, insights, and implications of the conduct of Islamist actors during the multi-front campaign in the past year concerning the function of revolutionary religious ideology in their policy. Although the symposium expressed broad consensus regarding the importance of ideology in the conduct of these actors, disagreements emerged regarding the need for a paradigm shift on this issue in light of the lessons of the war and the impact of the regional war's implications on how to deal with revolutionary ideological actors.

Introduction

Hamas' murderous attack from Gaza on October 7, 2023, reopened the debate on the role of revolutionary ideological conceptions in decision-making processes among radical Islamist actors. The public and academic discourse that arose following the attack repeatedly raised the question of whether the intelligence agencies, commentators, and academic researchers had not underestimated the importance of religious ideology in the conduct of Islamist entities, movements, and organizations. To examine this issue, on November 6, 2024, we held a symposium with the participation of academic researchers with the aim of examining three main issues:

1. Does the October 7 attack and the lessons of the multi-arena campaign in the past year require a reassessment of the weight of religious and ideological conceptions in

the conduct and decision-making processes of Islamist actors, as opposed to pragmatic interests and considerations?

2. Can we identify shared characteristics and/or differences in the conduct of different regional actors, with an emphasis on Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, concerning the role of ideological or religious conceptions in their decision-making? What explains these differences?
3. Policy recommendations regarding how to adequately address Islamist actors operating under a religious and revolutionary worldview.

The meeting was held virtually (on Zoom) and facilitated by Dr. Raz Zimmt. Prof. Meir Litvak, Dr. Dina Lisnyansky, Dr. Sarah Feuer, Dr. Daniel Sobelman, Dr. Michael Milshtein, and Yohanan Tzoreff participated.

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Methodological issues

One of the issues that stood out during the meeting was the methodological dimension. Some of the participants emphasized that there is no contradiction between ideology and pragmatic conduct based on interests (“both,” not “either-or”). It is impossible to treat ideology and pragmatism separately because understanding the interests of a specific actor is subject to interpretation based on that actor’s ideological worldview.

Furthermore, framing the distinction between ideological conduct and pragmatic or rational conduct does not help us understand the reality. When we encounter a certain kind of conduct that does not apply all of the ideological elements, we might conclude that it is a pragmatic movement, but this is not necessarily a correct understanding of the nature of the actor. For example, on several occasions, the Hamas movement declared a change in its definition of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, so some concluded that it was a pragmatic movement, ignoring the fact that it operated according to a firm ideology whose importance was not sufficiently understood. An ideological movement can be pragmatic without relinquishing its ideological conceptions, while waiting for the opportunity to implement them. Pragmatism means finding the best way to achieve the goal, which in itself can be morally abhorrent. The greatest murderers in history were sometimes pragmatic, so this term has no significance.

Some of the discussion’s participants pointed out a methodological flaw on the part of academia and intelligence agencies in treating ideological ideas seriously. One of the researchers even expressed remorse for a mistaken understanding of the ideological worldview and its importance. It was noted that many academic and intelligence researchers do not understand ideological people. Academia is overly influenced by Marxist and post-modern conceptions that lead to the mistaken assessment that people do not really believe

in the ideas they present, and that this is just a pretense for attaining material interests and power.

Moreover, the difficulty in deciphering Hamas reflects deep problems in Israeli society, as fewer and fewer Israelis, including those in academia, the media, and even the intelligence community, have a good command of the region’s languages, understand its culture in depth, or know its history. In the background are the low status of the social sciences and humanities, the collective veneration of studies and professions that produce fast money, and the idolization of the information and cyber revolution, Google Translate, artificial intelligence, and big data. In the current era, those who set the tone in government, academia, and defense are analysts who rely on Western logic. They present absolute and supposedly precise quantitative data, usually without being proficient at the language, culture, and history of the “other,” and there is a constant decline in the stature of the “Arabists,” content experts who, in many cases, hold the keys to deciphering the logic of those who are not members of our culture. There is no way around it: those who are not proficient at the research object’s language and the intricacies of its culture cannot claim to understand it and should feel deep discomfort when presenting analyses of it. This position also led to disagreements, with some claiming that several very good researchers of Islamic movements are not proficient at Arabic.

Furthermore, many secular researchers find it very difficult to understand religious ideology. For example, some have difficulty understanding the conduct of the Islamic Republic, whose basic need for deterrence also stems from ideology and from a Shiite worldview in which Iranian Islamic culture is threatened by the West, especially the United States. This influenced Iran’s unwillingness to pursue cooperation with the Americans, due to the constant fear of Western influence. Hezbollah and Hamas also acted based on ideology in their enormous investments in

military infrastructure over the years. Even when these actors take pragmatic steps, this does not mean that they have relinquished their ideological vision, for example, regarding fulfilling the long-term vision of destroying Israel. This is not just rhetoric and must be taken seriously.

According to some of the participants, the Israeli analysis of the reasons for the October 7 attack also reflects a misunderstanding of Hamas. One conspicuous such misunderstanding is an attempt to find reasons from the realms of Western political realism: the claim that Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar sought to prevent normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia (even though the idea arose in his mind a decade before discussion of normalization began), to strengthen Hamas' standing in the internal arena, and to bring about the release of prisoners. In practice, his logic was based on an ideological motive: jihad was the essence. The campaign was his life's mission and was perceived as the divine will or a divine command that could not be evaded, contrary to some Israeli figures wondering whether Hamas could have been dissuaded from carrying its plan if a political initiative or economic gestures had been put forward. At the root of the October 7 debacle is an inability to decipher Hamas' logic, particularly the weight of the movement's ideology in its considerations, and the tendency to assume that extremists who come to power gradually become more moderate. As modern history has taught us, a process of moderation is possible. For example, the Soviet Union became more moderate between Stalin's rule and Brezhnev's rule. However, this is not inevitable (Hitler and Saddam Hussein, for example, did not become more moderate). Additionally, extremists usually move in the opposite direction: they accumulate more resources that enable them to instigate even more violent actions than in the past, to fulfill their ideological vision. While being in government forces them to provide civil services and develop the population's

quality of life, it simultaneously enables them to accumulate and develop weapons, shape the cognition of the societies they rule, and enlist them in the struggles that they wage. Contrary to this claim, one of the participants in the discussion pointed out that the trigger to Hamas' decision to carry out the October 7 attack emerged only following the failure of Operation Guardian of the Walls and the final formation of the "convergence of the arenas" concept. Hence, ideological movements also consider capabilities and are not committed to implementing their ideological views at all costs.

In attempting to understand the methodological failure, it was also claimed that the methodological blindness is partly the result of a psychological failure: we have difficulty dealing with and accepting the idea that there is someone who wants to destroy us. Consequently, even when we found signs that the Islamist actors mean what they say, there was a tendency to diminish the importance of these statements and to claim that they do not have the ability to carry out their ideology-based intentions. Not accepting the idea that the other wants to destroy you is a mechanism for coping with helplessness. In contrast, it was claimed in the discussion that over the years, the Arabs had provided Israel with many reasons to take their threats lightly, because they made baseless boastful and vain statements and sometimes even became the objects of ridicule and scorn in the eyes of their own people (as Fouad Ajami put it: "bloated clichés."). Thus, not every statement should be taken literally.

Does the October 7 attack require a paradigm shift?

The discussion on the significance of the October 7 attack with respect to the need for a reassessment of the role of ideology among Islamist actors sparked debate. According to some of the researchers, even today, we can argue that the conduct of these actors is based mainly on a strategic, not an ideological, dimension. Although there was consensus that

ideological conceptions must not be ignored, especially among actors with a revolutionary religious worldview, actors operating in the framework of the pro-Iranian axis (the “resistance front”) in the region also make decisions in a cold and utilitarian manner based on strategic considerations. According to this approach, even Sinwar acted in accordance with a strategic plan, which ultimately did not succeed, but could have succeeded under certain conditions. Hamas believed that if it did not act soon via a regional campaign against Israel, the Israeli government’s policy would create irreversible facts on the ground. From this perspective, there was a strategic and regional decision here to act in October 2023. The motives for the October 7 attack were thus thoroughly nationalist and aimed to create shock on the ground that would restore the Palestinian issue’s central place on the agenda. It is not certain that the motives for the decision to carry out the attack were related to an ideological vision of destroying Israel, because Hamas itself did not really believe that it was capable of doing so. In contrast with this approach, some indicated other evidence from the past year proving that Sinwar actually did believe that it was capable.

According to this approach, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s decision to join the campaign against Israel was also based on strategic and pragmatic considerations. While he built up his organization’s military capabilities over the years, unlike Sinwar, he would not have carried out the plan to “conquer the Galilee” except in a scenario in which he believed it was likely that he could defeat Israel. Furthermore, the actors in the “resistance axis” are motivated by a strategy of asymmetric deterrence, and this is a common thread in the discourse of all of these actors, which reflects in-depth thoughts about the rules of the game, rounds of fighting, equations, deterrence, and winning on points. The struggle over the regional order is also the result of strategic considerations related to reshaping the Middle East, and it could even reflect “Kissingerian” thinking. This does not mean that

the ideological dimension is unimportant, but according to some participants, there is no need to reassess its weight. And if a reassessment of this dimension is needed, this also demands relating to its place in the decision-making process in Israel.

In contrast with this approach, some argued that the events of the past year demand that we take the role of ideology among regional Islamist actors more seriously. One of the participants argued that the history of Western contention with Islamic fundamentalism is saturated with a severe lack of understanding, which has sometimes caused strategic disasters. This deficiency has lasted half a century and stems from several characteristics of Western culture, especially the political, military, academic, cultural, and media establishment. The lack of understanding is the result of many people’s tendency to decipher a foreign reality without being familiar with its unique characteristics, or even a recognition of this conceptual gap, as well as the profound impact of worldviews and wishful thinking. This has created a situation where, for decades, the discussion taking place has been based on conceptualizations that do not match the unique reality of the world of Islam. A clear distinction between extremists and pragmatists is presented as an example of this, as in practice, there is no contradiction between them, and pragmatism is not a synonym for moderation. This has been proven for decades by the calculated behavior of Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, which prioritize ideological interests but know how to be flexible in the face of constraints and dangers. Another confusion is between messianism and irrationality. With respect to this, intelligence bodies in Israel before October 7 described Sinwar and Iran’s former president, Ebrahim Raisi, as out of touch with reality, without understanding that a yearning to fulfill the end of days here and now is their logic.

In this context, the conflict between Israel and Hamas is a unique case study of the Western difficulty in reading foreign culture

in general, and modern Islam in particular. This is an experience that illustrates a variety of fundamental problems, including projecting my logic on the other, in particular, the belief that there is a universal human desire for a “good life”; analyzing new challenges according to old thought paradigms and criteria that are based on past experience and the familiar world; difficulty for a society in which the weight of ideologies is decreasing to understand a society in which they still have considerable power and influence; and an inability to decipher a society whose fundamental conceptions, including the dimension of time, the value of life, the relation between the individual and the collective, and the concept of the “other,” are totally different. The conflict with Hamas over the years has reflected an inability to interpret the structural ambiguity that is inherent in many Islamic movements. The questions regarding Hamas that have arisen in Israel in the past 35 years and the basic assumptions that have been formulated regarding the movement demonstrate the fundamental gaps between Israel’s perception of reality and that of the Palestinian side: Is Hamas a terrorist organization, a political party, or a social movement (all three, of course)? Is it more Palestinian or Islamic (both equally)? What is the difference between “political Hamas” and “military Hamas” – a misleading distinction that the movement helps create?

According to this approach, Hamas’ updated 2017 charter should also be seen as an act of deception. As October’s events show, the movement was never really interested in shaping Palestinian society or concern for its welfare. When the updated document was published, Hamas’ television station preached killing Jews. The document did not express a Hamas desire for gradual change and reconciliation, but rather a desire to take over the Palestinian Authority. According to this conception, neither can Nasrallah’s decision to join the war be understood except via ideological considerations. Hezbollah’s leader

understood well that its joining would have a cost, but nevertheless, he decided to join the campaign due to his ideological commitment.

Differences between different actors

The discussion’s participants agreed that whether ideological conceptions influence the various actors to a greater or lesser degree, there are differences between different actors. Each, whether a state or a sub-state actor, has a different rationale. In general, non-state actors are more willing to sacrifice and to pay heavier prices, because they are more influenced by ideology than state actors.

In addition, even when actors have a shared interest, interests in general do not entirely overlap. For example, it is clear that there are differences between Hamas and Hezbollah: Hamas relates to Palestine as an area that is almost completely occupied. In contrast, Hezbollah, in its view, has succeeded in liberating Lebanon from Israeli occupation. For an actor like Iran, there is more time to fulfill its ideology, in contrast with Hamas, which believed that it did not have time to wait before carrying out the October 7 attack, due to the erosion of the Palestinian issue’s importance.

Other issues

In the discussion, it was argued that pragmatism sometimes expresses the beginning of ideological change. Ideologies can only be fulfilled in a utopian era; they are written in order to set a goal. One of the participants argued that Hamas is an example of a pragmatic movement that adapts its policy and conceptions in accordance with reality. Islamic movements worldwide face a harsh reality of persecution and suppression, so they sometimes need to obscure the religious dimension. Hamas also tried to reach out to the Palestinian Authority and to integrate within the framework of the Oslo process, despite its opposition to the process. Pragmatism does not necessarily herald ideological change, but it indicates a desire to integrate in a way that will change the

reality in the long term. This is apparent, one participant argued, in Hamas' 2017 document, which redefines the conflict in a much more nationalist and less Islamist manner. Other participants rejected this argument.

It was also argued in the discussion that it is a mistake to see Hamas as part of the Muslim Brotherhood camp. While Palestinian nationalism has played a certain role with Hamas (similar to other Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region), it is closer to jihadist movements. Contrary to this argument, one of the participants stated that after the fall of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, Hamas largely abandoned its Islamic identity and focused on being Palestinian more than Islamic.

Another issue that was discussed is the need to reassess the Sunni-Shiite rift as a factor shaping the region. For example, the Houthis are not a typical Shiite group, and they have elements that are very reminiscent of Sunni jihadist movements, as well as an emphasis on Palestine as a religious issue (and not just a nationalist one). Turkey's conduct since the beginning of the war is also more similar to that of the Shiite axis than one would have thought if the Shiite-Sunni rift had been a dominant factor in shaping the region.

Policy recommendations

The discussion participants noted that struggles with ideological movements can last for many,

many years. Consequently, Israel must defend itself until the hoped-for ideological change occurs. This does not mean that diverse forms of action should not or cannot be taken against an ideological actor, but we must recognize the limits of arrangements with such actors. Meanwhile, Israel should operate with alternative actors, such as the Palestinian Authority; doing so could weaken Hamas.

In the opinion of some participants, recognizing the importance of ideology requires urgent action, given the threats from Islamist actors, while striving to eliminate the military capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah. The Iranian ideological vision of destroying Israel should not be taken lightly, even if it is not necessarily a work plan for the short or medium term. To this end, Israel should exploit the current opportunity and the fast changes in the region by pursuing military and political measures in Lebanon and in the Palestinian arena.

Some participants argued that it is too early to draw unequivocal operative conclusions from the October 7 attack and the multi-arena campaign that broke out following it, without a sufficient basis of knowledge and understanding of the events and developments of the past year. Additionally, Israel cannot afford to focus only on intentions, without a sober assessment of the other side's capabilities, because this could lead to out-of-control defense spending that takes an unbearable economic and social toll.