

CHAPTER TWO

RADICALIZATION AND "HAMASIFICATION" IN THE GAZA STRIP

Radicalization in Gaza predates Hamas' takeover in 2007, with roots reaching back to the mid-twentieth century and decades marked by national trauma, accumulating grievances, political exclusion, economic decline, and recurring cycles of violent confrontation. The harsh realities of life in the Gaza Strip, of course, are also embedded within the broader framework of the Palestinian national struggle and the Muslim Brotherhood's vision of reshaping the region under religious rule.

Following its seizure of power in the Gaza Strip in 2007, Hamas transformed the territory into both a local-national battlefield and a strategic outpost serving a transnational agenda. The confrontation with Israel, the reality of economic blockade, and internal Palestinian fragmentation enabled Hamas to present itself simultaneously as a resistance movement and as a governing authority. Under these conditions, Hamas reshaped and subsumed Gaza's local identity within the movement's extremist ideological framework, embedding it across the various systems of governance and everyday life (Guterman, 2020).

THE ROOTS OF RADICALIZATION IN THE GAZA STRIP

The Gaza Strip took shape as a symbol of the Palestinian national struggle as early as 1948, with the influx of large numbers of Palestinian refugees during the war. In the Palestinian collective consciousness, the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip—located adjacent to the State of Israel—serve as living testimony to the injustice inflicted upon them in the context of the "Nakba," and as a symbol of the uncompromising determination to return to lands perceived as having been taken from them.

The radicalization of Gazan society cannot be understood without reference to prolonged exposure to trauma, displacement, and structural isolation. The majority of Gaza's residents (approximately three quarters) are refugees or descendants of refugees who have grown up under conditions of overcrowding, economic dependency, and limited mobility; as a result, a refugee consciousness is deeply embedded in the local experience. Recurrent military confrontations have inflicted severe human and material losses, and most residents of the Strip have experienced the death or injury of one or more family members, embedding the experience of violence in nearly every household.

Even prior to Hamas' takeover of the Strip in 2007, the population experienced decades of marginalization, political violence, and economic dependence on external sources. Under the Israeli military government and civil administration that preceded the Oslo process, Palestinians in Gaza were not regarded as full political subjects, and local economic development was subject to heavy constraints. Although many found employment in Israel, industrial and agricultural growth within Gaza itself remained limited due to restrictions on land use, trade, and infrastructure.

More importantly, the experience of life under Israeli rule intensified antagonism toward Israel, while the strong religious component of Gazan identity created fertile ground for the penetration of radical Islamist ideas. On this basis, and through exposure to Muslim Brotherhood ideology via ties to Egypt, Ahmed Yassin founded al-Mujama' al-Islami in the 1970s. Operating under the watch of—and at times with the encouragement of—the Israeli authorities, the organization established a network of religious and social institutions throughout the Strip. Through these *da'wa* institutions, al-Mujama' al-Islami propagated the Islamist worldview of the Muslim Brotherhood and laid the human and ideological foundations for the establishment of Hamas with the outbreak of the First Intifada.

The Oslo Accords granted Gaza's residents only limited sovereignty and autonomy under the Palestinian Authority. Key levers of control—borders, airspace, movement, and the population registry—remained in Israel's hands. While the agreements initially generated hopes for self-determination, they ultimately institutionalized a hybrid system of governance that disappointed many Palestinians. Over time, corruption, inefficiency, and the Authority's dependence on foreign donors eroded its legitimacy, playing into Hamas' hands.

Hamas capitalized on this sense of disillusionment and continued to build a parallel network of mosques, schools, charitable organizations, and clinics. These *da'wa* networks provided both tangible assistance and ideological guidance, presenting Hamas as a grassroots alternative to an elite-dominated Authority. In marginalized neighborhoods and refugee camps, Hamas offered a sense of purpose, responsibility, and identity—elements that the Palestinian Authority increasingly failed to provide (International Crisis Group, 2003; Levitt, 2006).

Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, intended to unilaterally end the occupation, was widely perceived as a liberation achieved through *muqāwama*—the armed resistance of Palestinian factions, led by Hamas. The prevailing belief was that terrorism, rather than diplomacy, had compelled Israel to withdraw. This narrative shaped the political climate ahead of the 2006 elections and directly contributed to Hamas' victory.

However, the sense of victory was short-lived. Following Hamas' electoral victory in 2006, its violent military coup in the Gaza Strip in 2007, and the subsequent rocket fire toward Israel, Israel and Egypt imposed a comprehensive land, sea, and air blockade aimed at containing Hamas. The initial feeling of liberation was quickly replaced by a reality of siege and isolation. The blockade had devastating economic and humanitarian consequences for the broader population. Gaza's already modest productive base collapsed: by 2010, more than 90 percent of factories had closed, exports had fallen by over 95 percent, and unemployment had soared. The blockade also severely disrupted access

to essential goods and services, including medical equipment, fuel, and construction materials (European Council on Foreign Relations, n.d).

As 80 percent of Gaza's residents came to rely on humanitarian assistance and 60 percent faced food insecurity (Tannira, 2021), Hamas' provision of services through its charitable arms became a lifeline for many. Its ability to deliver education, healthcare, financial assistance and security amid systemic crisis, strengthened its local credibility and further entrenched its ideological authority at the core of everyday survival (International Crisis Group, 2008).

This reversal—from a sense of victory to subjugation under siege—deepened a pervasive feeling of ongoing military, political, and economic loss, and shaped a worldview in which violence came to be seen as legitimate, moral, and even sacred. For many, "resistance" is not merely a political act but an existential one, rooted in inherited suffering and the belief that powerlessness justifies extraordinary responses. As trauma becomes intergenerational, the struggle itself is increasingly internalized by the broader public as a defining element of collective identity.

HAMASIFICATION: THE RADICALIZATION OF THE GAZA STRIP UNDER HAMAS RULE

Hamas' electoral victory in 2006 and its violent takeover of Gaza in 2007 dismantled the Palestinian Authority's already fragile institutional framework. After a week of armed and violent clashes, Hamas expelled Fatah-affiliated officials—some of whom were killed—disbanded the Authority's security forces, and unilaterally seized control of the Strip. In the institutional vacuum that emerged, Hamas rapidly constructed a new system of governance that blurred the boundaries between state-like administration and ideological enforcement. This new model combined bureaucratic control with loyalty-based appointments, enabling Hamas to entrench its authority and worldview across all sectors of public life:

- **Civil administration and security:** Hamas established a new administrative structure, created government ministries and public agencies, and staffed

them with loyalists. The Ministry of Interior became a central instrument of control, responsible for monitoring protests, surveilling the population, and maintaining internal stability. Internal security forces were empowered to track critics, deter opposition, and suppress demonstrations, thereby serving the movement's political hegemony (International Crisis Group, 2008).

- **Judicial and legal system:** A parallel judicial system was developed, incorporating Sharia courts alongside civil institutions. Appointments were made on the basis of ideological affiliation rather than independence or professional merit, ensuring that judicial rulings reinforced the movement's agenda and insulated its leadership from judicial oversight and accountability (International Crisis Group, 2003).
- **Revenue generation and a parallel economy:** Under conditions of blockade and restrictions on external aid, Hamas established an autonomous financial ecosystem based on taxation of smuggled goods, levies on fuel, businesses, and humanitarian assistance, and centralized control over charitable funds (*zakat*). This parallel economy financed Hamas' governing apparatus and deepened public dependence on services operated by the movement (International Crisis Group, 2008).
- **Institutionalized indoctrination in the education system and religious institutions:** Hamas formally took control of the ministries of education and religious affairs and reshaped curricula to emphasize themes of resistance, steadfastness, jihad, martyrdom, and other extremist Islamist values, while removing references to peace agreements or coexistence (Impact-SE, 2009). Resistance as articulated by Hamas was framed as both a national and religious duty, with the aim of shaping future generations around ideological commitment to a narrative of perpetual confrontation. Control over the Ministry of Religious Affairs enabled the vetting of clerics, the standardization of Friday sermons, and the steering of community events to ensure alignment between religious messaging and political objectives.

- **Welfare, *da'wa*, and social networks:** Hamas' *da'wa* infrastructure was expanded into a quasi-state welfare system. Food distribution, healthcare services, scholarships, and emergency assistance were delivered through Hamas-affiliated charitable networks that also functioned as instruments of political influence. Beneficiaries of these services were at times subject to ideological screening, reinforcing patterns of clientelism and deepening dependence on Hamas (International Crisis Group, 2008).
- **Media, public ceremonies, and children's programming:** Al-Aqsa TV functioned as a key instrument of early-age indoctrination. Various programs (such as *Farfur* and *Tomorrow's Pioneers*) promoted models of resistance, religious loyalty, and the glorification of martyrdom as an honorable sacrifice rewarded by divine favor (Margolin & Levitt, 2023). In parallel, funerals, mass rallies, and annual commemorative events fused religious symbolism with political messaging, elevated *shahids* as role models, and projected a sense of collective unity (Reuters, 2017).
- **Community mobilization and takeover of civil society:** Youth camps, women's organizations, and charitable associations expanded the movement's penetration into private and communal life. These institutions provided services while simultaneously reinforcing ideological messages, crowding out independent civil society organizations and deepening dependence on Hamas-controlled structures (International Crisis Group, 2007).
- **Leadership messaging:** Over the years, senior Hamas leaders have consistently framed the ongoing hardships—including those experienced under their own rule—as an integral component of a sacred national struggle. They have employed religious language to promote messages of resilience, to legitimize sustained violence, and to preserve political loyalty to Hamas as the standard-bearer of Palestinian interests and divine purpose (European Council, n.d).

- **Enforcement and surveillance:** Internal security services monitored public behavior and expressions of opinion in online discourse, while informal social networks within everyday social circles (extended families, neighborhoods, and the like) enforced conformity. Surveillance, intimidation, and targeted harassment created an environment in which deviation from the movement's norms exposed individuals to the risk of social ostracism and even physical harm (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

The capture of Gazan public consciousness unfolded in parallel with the construction of Hamas' military capabilities. The subordination of collective resources to the vision of armed resistance, together with the glorification of military power, further contributed to shaping the collective ethos in line with Hamas' extremist and uncompromising worldview.

Thus, through coordinated control over administrative, judicial, religious, and social institutions, Hamas built its regime in the Gaza Strip around an organizing principle of **ideological loyalty**. The outcome was not merely authoritarian control, but the deep embedding of extremist ideology into the functioning of governance systems and everyday life. The combined mechanisms—spanning education and religion, welfare and media, and extending to security and the legal system—produced a deeply **entrenched system of identity formation**.

It is important to emphasize that Hamas' grip has rested not only on institutional control but also on the mobilization of a deeply entrenched ethos of struggle against Israel that predated the movement and served as a readily available normative foundation. Decades of war, blockade, and political exclusion reinforced existing beliefs and values: the justification of maximalist Palestinian claims alongside the delegitimization of Israel; profound feelings of victimhood and insecurity coupled with a self-image of moral righteousness and courage; and patriotism and unity under a shared threat. These perceptions and values were "injected" into Gaza's population through the systems under Hamas' control. As a result, personal and collective

identities in the Strip became fused around a worldview that frames the conflict with Israel as an existential imperative, renders compromise with it illegitimate, and casts the uncompromising struggle for its destruction as both the sole path to realizing Palestinian rights and a divine commandment.

CONCLUSION: STRUCTURAL CRISIS AS A DRIVER OF RADICALIZATION

Radicalization in Gaza is the long-term product of the realities of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, experiences of displacement and occupation, and decades of political exclusion, economic decline, and institutional erosion. Together, these factors have created fertile conditions for the emergence and consolidation of extremist nationalist and religious ideologies.

Hamas exploited these conditions effectively. Through targeted social engineering, implemented via the systems under its control, it embedded its ideology and shaped public consciousness around a narrative of resistance and confrontation. Over time, radicalization was normalized and woven into Gaza's social fabric. The result is a deeply entrenched ideological ecosystem. After nearly two decades of Hamas rule, radicalization is no longer confined to political elites or militant networks; it is present in schools, religious life, the media, and the everyday social structures of Gazan society.

To the extent that one can rely on survey data and the assessments of various actors familiar with the Gazan arena, the Islamist agenda that has driven this system is not shared by all residents of the Strip. Yet it retains considerable persuasive power, rooted in the centrality of Islam within the Palestinian historical narrative and framing "resistance" as a sacred obligation. Accordingly, this ideological foundation cannot be erased overnight; it must be challenged and reshaped consistently, its influence contained, and alternative visions advanced—visions that resonate with prevailing cultural narratives and with the national ethos of the Palestinians and of the broader Arab and Muslim community to which they belong.