

SOCIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVES AS A LEGITIMIZING FORCE AS SEEN IN HAMAS AND HEZBOLLAH*

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The world in its time has seen many Islamic fundamentalist groups come and go, many violent in nature. This tendency towards violence has become what many often think of when they think of Islam, particularly for many in Israel and the United States. This lens, one soaked in years of blood, ash, and rubble, is the lens through which many view Islamic fundamentalist groups. So when one watches as one, and then two, of these groups rise to political power in a region so full of volatility and tension, one becomes dumbfounded. The world became struck with horrified awe as two of these groups, Hamas and Hezbollah, rose to become political powerhouses in Palestine and Lebanon, respectively. However, despite what many may think of these recent events, these groups did not become great political powers because of their terrorist actions. Hamas and Hezbollah have used social justice initiatives to legitimize themselves as political forces in the Middle East.

Social Justice in Islam, by Sayyid Qutb, published in 1948 is the basis for much of the social justice work performed by Islamic groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah (Armstrong). Qutb introduced in this book the “three basic elements of social justice in Islam. These are the absolute freedom of conscience, the complete equality of all men, and the social interdependence among members of the society” (neareast.org). These elements, Qutb argues, are necessary for social justice to occur in Islam.

According to the first element, the absolute freedom of conscience, one must surrender all authority to God; God is the supreme ruler in one’s life (neareast.org). According to the second element, the complete equality of all men, one must submit oneself to the fact that all are equal and, being equals must help each other (nearest.org). The third element, social interdependence, calls for people to take action to make sure all have enough to meet their basic needs (neareast.org). As one can see, all of these elements must be taken together for social justice to be successful. This is because to accept God as your supreme ruler in life means you also accept God’s teaching that all are equal and to make all equal, action must be taken for this to happen; thus, social interdependence.

Social Justice in Islam was written by Qutb in response to the many offenses he saw present in Islamic society (Brown). For example:

When there are millions who cannot afford the simplest dwelling...who cannot even find rags to cover their bodies, it is an impossible luxury that a mosque should cost a hundred thousand guineas, or that the Ka’bah should be covered with a ceremonial robe, embroidered with gold (Brown 155).

Throughout much of Islam such discrepancies were the case in Qutb’s time, and still for many others today. Such writing then, although from several decades ago, still rings true today, much like Luther and his teachings rang through the halls of Christianity for centuries.

Social justice initiatives in Islam began with the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood (Armstrong). Under Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group performed many social, populist functions: the creation of hospitals, pharmacies, etc. to meet the needs of many of

the people of Egypt (Armstrong). What al-Banna and his group did was fill in the gaps between what the government provided and what they (the Muslim Brotherhood) felt should have been provided. Under al-Banna the Muslim Brotherhood followed the three basic elements of social justice outlined by Qutb, as seen in their credo despite being founded prior to his book being written: “the Quran is our constitution; the Prophet is our leader; Struggle is our way,” (fas.org). After al-Banna’s death in 1949 though, the Muslim Brotherhood began to lose their way.

The Muslim Brotherhood began to turn towards violence and clandestine acts after the death of al-Banna in their fight against what they felt were the wrongs of Islamic Egyptian society (Armstrong). Much of this problem can be blamed on the lack of a charismatic leader to take al-Banna’s place, thus allowing for the Brotherhood to fall whim to multiple voices creating sects within the group (Armstrong). The formation of these sects also hurt the original purpose of the Brotherhood because the violence perpetrated by a majority of the Brotherhood destroyed the credibility of all of the sects (Armstrong). However, to this day, the Brotherhood remains as an organization dedicated to providing social services to Islamic society, giving it some measure of legitimacy (wikipedia.org). These social justice initiatives also provide legitimacy to other groups otherwise tarnished by the stain of violence by its members.

The founder of one of these groups was a member himself in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ahmad Yasin (Mishal & Sela). Sheik Yasin knew that if he practiced *da’wa*, education and preaching, the regime would leave him alone, as he learned from the Muslim Brotherhood (Mishal & Sela). He took this *da’wa* into the refugee camps on the Gaza Strip in 1968 where conditions were excellent for “communal activism informed by radicalized religiosity” (Mishal & Sala 19). For two decades prior to the founding of Hamas, Sheik Yasin would push the practice of social activism to improve the living conditions of the refugees and education for the youth; he even became the supervisor of the Islamic Center, which controlled religious and educational activity in the Gaza Strip (Mishal & Sala). Since then, Hamas has continued to develop a large repertoire of charitable organizations that serve the purpose of legitimizing Hamas as a political entity (Levitt).

The legitimization of Hamas through social initiatives also garners the support of a large majority of Palestinians, as seen in the Palestinian elections held a few months back. This is due to the poor socioeconomic status of many Palestinians, which is also due to their poor geographical location as a result of Israeli occupation and war with the Israelis (Nusse). Hamas provides educational services, social and charitable services (refugees, orphans, relief), cultural services, health services (clinics, etc.), and women’s institutions amongst many, many others (Levitt). The legitimization of Hamas through such organizations, institutions, and services allows them to “deflect investigations...as “witch hunts” or efforts to subjugate Palestinian society” (Levitt 94). The ties Hamas has to many seemingly legitimate organizations not only provides Hamas with legitimacy by association, but also allows Hamas to acquire funding from “...unwitting sources...” (Levitt 94). One of these sources was Citibank until 2001, when Israel intelligence informed them that an Arabic bank they provided funding for had many ties to Hamas (Levitt).

The legitimacy provided Hamas by these social initiatives has proven very successful in their recent attempts to gain political power. In 2005 the group had great success in municipal elections as a direct result of their social work; “Mohammad al-Masri, a Hamas candidate in municipal elections ... anticipated that Hamas’ strong record in the field of *da’wa* activities would lead to electoral success...” (Levitt 94). One of the elements of these social initiatives, equality, is prevalent in the conflict between Hamas and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as it becomes apparent that while many

Palestinians suffer in poverty, those close to Yasser Arafat, the late leader of the PLO, are doing quite well for themselves (Nusse). Such issues will lend Hamas popular support, Nusse argues.

As for Hezbollah, their origins lay more in the hands of Iran and Syria and the hostile environment that gave birth to this violent organization turned Lebanese political powerhouse (Hamzeh). With little influence from the Muslim Brotherhood, unlike its brethren organization, Hamas, Hezbollah had a more violent focus in its beginnings, not worrying itself about legitimacy and staying beneath the radar of security forces and intelligence agencies (Hamzeh). However, it learned the importance of legitimacy as it went on (Hamzeh).

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 in response to Israeli occupation of much of Lebanon (Hamzeh). By 1988 Hezbollah had created a “Social Unit”, one of eight units of Hezbollah’s hierarchical structure (Hamzeh 49). This Social Unit “provides social welfare services as well as technical help...” (Hamzeh 49). This unit has set up institutions from agricultural cooperatives to the building of cultural centers (Hamzeh). Much of their social initiative work was focused on Southern Lebanon and then proceeded north because their main goal was to redevelop the territory once occupied by Israel (Hamzeh).

The wide range of social initiatives begun by Hezbollah has provided them with not just legitimacy alone, but also political success. In 1992 they held eight of twenty seven seats in the Shi’ite Lebanese Parliament, seven in 1996, and nine in 2000 (Hamzeh). However despite this success, although limited, Hezbollah refused to take a cabinet seat or a ministerial portfolio because “they are bound by God’s laws, not human laws” (Hamzeh 120). Despite this ideological stance, in 2005 they recommended two ministerial candidates for Lebanese leader Fouad Siniora to include in his cabinet (Economist 2006). However, as of November 11, 2006, Hezbollah is threatening Siniora that they will take to the streets if they do not get a third of his 24-seat cabinet (Economist 2006). Hezbollah has made such a demand as it rides a wave of popularity after the recent war between Israel and Lebanon (more specifically Hezbollah) because of its rebuilding efforts and payment to victims of the war (with Iranian money) (Economist).

This situation casts a light on the difficulty of domestic powers, let alone foreign powers, to deal with the legitimization of these groups. Siniora, if he grants Hezbollah the number of seats they are demanding, will face great pressure from western powers but will be lauded by his Arab neighbors, never mind what may happen domestically. Such fears are justified after watching aid for Palestinians get cut by an overwhelming majority of western countries including the United States after the election of Hamas as the controlling party of Palestine because of their terrorist nature, ignoring entirely their social activism (News Agency).

Hamas’ rise to victory in the elections was a welcome occurrence to many Islamic states, many of which offered to make up for the shortfall in the budget due to US and EU aid cuts (New Politics). Much of this is due to Hamas’ humanitarian efforts, their social initiatives (New Politics). Even Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, approved of the victory of Hamas while much of the western world retracted aid and cut diplomatic ties (New Politics). Such actions just go to further show the legitimizing effect social initiatives can have, even on a terrorist group.

Hezbollah, despite its limited success, has garnered the attention of the world in its forays into the political arena. It has the support of Islamic states such as Iran, which provides it with much of its funding (Hamzeh). Hezbollah also enjoys fervent support from Syria (War). Western powers, on the other hand, do not look favorably upon Hezbollah, particularly the United States (War). Therefore, Hezbollah is now finding itself, more than ever, embroiled in the Arab-Israeli/West conflict, which will only continue to provide it a stage upon which to enact further social initiatives (War). However, unlike Hamas, Hezbollah has a global reach throughout the world; from South America to Asia (Global

Reach). This global network is under investigation by western intelligence agencies, including US ones (Global Reach).

Hezbollah's funding from Syria and Iran furthermore, is a hot button issue for Israel, because these two countries have a sworn purpose to rid the Middle East of Israeli presence (War). This has become particularly more relevant with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of Iran, for he made statements prior to being elected to the effect that Israel must be wiped off the face of the earth (War). With Iran's supplying of Hezbollah with rockets and Iran's own long-range rocket program in collaboration with their growing nuclear program, Israel has great reason to be fearful and on the defensive (War). It is these rockets that played a role in the drama acted out in the Middle East during the summer of 2006.

For over a month Israel and Hezbollah were at war. Israel attacked Lebanon as a whole because of their approval of Hezbollah as a political force and lack of disciplinary action against the group for their terrorist activities (War). Hezbollah, in response to the Israeli attacks, began to fire rockets at targets deep within Israel, such as Tel Aviv (War). Fortunately this war ended with a ceasefire but is a prime example of how quickly tensions in the Middle East can lead to war, one with heavy civilian costs.

Ultimately, it is the civilians who pay the cost in lives, money, and material goods for the conflicts between these quasi-legitimized political parties and the states that still consider them terrorist groups. Such groups add a third-party non-state dimension to international relations in the Middle East, and elsewhere, that makes it gravely difficult to resolve issues.

Other groups still in search of political legitimacy despite their terrorist leanings include: the Muslim Brotherhood, Free Aceh Movement, Al-Ittihad al-Islami, and other lesser movements (fas.org). The Muslim Brotherhood, once a large and significant force in Middle East politics, now continues to struggle with maintaining its political legitimacy.

The Free Aceh Movement is led by Islamic Separatists in the westernmost part of Sumatra (Indonesia) where extremist fundamentalism Islam is supreme (fas.org). The goal of this movement is "...to establish an independent Islamic state in the Special Region of Aceh in northern Sumatra and combine their religious and nationalist appeal with exploitation of social and economic pressures and discontent..." (fas.org). In an attempt to gain their autonomy the group is looking to enact social initiatives that will address as well as exploit the social and economic pressures that they feel exist.

Al-Ittihad al-Islami is the largest militant Islamic group in Somalia, which rose to power in the early 1990s (fas.org). The goal of this group is to set up an Islamic regime in Somalia and force Ethiopia to cede territory to Somalia (fas.org). This group, like Hamas and Hezbollah, sponsors orphanages and schools, amongst other social programs (fas.org). Such activities make it difficult for external forces to take down groups like Al-Ittihad al-Islami.

Such groups should not be discouraged from existing, or be put on a generic list of terrorist organizations. These types of groups need to have their own listing and be dealt with as one would deal with a state that sponsors genocide or other violent acts; diplomacy first, aggression second. This will help promote other terrorist groups to take on more of a social activist role in their state. If the government of a state is not fulfilling the basic needs of its citizens and another group can, then that group should be allowed to do so and not be punished for it by having aid cut. Foreign governments must be more careful in labeling groups as terrorist organizations.

However, such groups should not escape punishment entirely. Some other form of punishment must be applied that will hurt the group but not the people the group is helping. Such action should be taken against Hamas and Hezbollah. The UN should block all weapons shipments to Lebanon so that the supply train for Hezbollah will be shut down. Also, foreign aid should be returned to the Palestinian authorities and Hamas, because they were rightfully elected as the majority party. They should not,

however, be treated delicately; the world must be firm and strict with their adoption of incentive measures for reform.

Hamas and Hezbollah are, at best, shining examples, for lack of better terminology, to other fundamentalist groups. Their role as enactors of social justice initiatives has led to their legitimization as political powerhouses in the Middle East as seen over the last few years. Hopefully, in time, the world will recognize them for their achievements, and look beyond their past failings.

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* This paper was written for the Junior Honors Seminar: Beyond Religious Fundamentalism (instructor - **Sr. Lucille C. Thibodeau**, p.m., Ph.D.) in fall 2006.

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