

The History, Politics and Ideology of Hamas

Written by David Maggs

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Hamas is a pragmatic Palestinian resistance movement intended to represent and lead a popular movement to “liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation”. It is very conscious of the need to focus on maintaining its own unity and the need to compete with other groups aiming at similar objectives.

To illustrate the evolution of Hamas into the characterisation argued for above, it is important to focus on Hamas’ complex relationships. An examination will follow of Hamas’ relationships with other Palestinian movements, focusing on its main competitor, Fatah, Hamas’ relations with Israel, internal relationships between party members and its relationship with the Palestinian people as a whole.[1] It becomes apparent that we should perceive Hamas as a governing political group concerned with internal unity, constituency support and increasing its support base.

It emerges that it is very difficult to identify a defined ideology shared by the entire movement over what would surely be fundamental concerns. The issue of peace and recognition of Israel, the Hamas Charter and of course Islam and Democracy will be examined in an attempt to underpin Hamas’ ideological stance, which it appears is highly volatile, one which gives way to pragmatism over doctrine. There is probably only one homogenously entrenched ideological principle – the liberation of Palestine, but what this really means, how it is achieved and on what time scale will have many different answers depending on which member of Hamas one talks to.

I divide Hamas’ evolution into four phases to help categorise Hamas’ evolution into the most pressing issues it faced at different times: formation, (1940s-1987) consolidation, (1987-1993) active resistance (1993-2006) and governance (2006-the present). My analysis however will stop short of 2009, where facts and evidence become obscure, though I will make a few comments of general interest beyond this date.

1) Relations with other Palestinian resistance movements

Formation up to 1987 – Diverting attention from Fatah and Islamic Jihad

The reasons for Hamas’ formation set up the competitive nature that dominates its relations with other Palestinian movements and also its commitment to popular resistance.

Until the mid-1980s, Islamic consciousness in Palestine had been monopolised by the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood (PMB). However their emphasis on creating an Islamic society resulted in their resistance activities being checked by Egypt in Gaza and Jordan in the West Bank, and they had not been engaged in persistent aggressive resistance since 1948.[2]

The popular resistance of the 1st Intifada threatened to destroy the PMB’s relevance. Beginning in 1967 with the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank (from now on, Palestine) and exacerbated by the Likud’s 1977 electoral victory and subsequent settlement policies as well as general economic poverty in Palestine, the situation was deteriorating.[3] Popular, sustained resistance became an important part of the Palestinian consciousness leading to the outbreak of the 1st Intifada, and the PMB found itself out of touch with the Palestinians. Ready to take

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the reins of this were of course Fatah and the PLO, but a serious threat was also encountered in Islamic Jihad, whose formation in 1985 had broken the PMB's dominance of Islam amongst Palestinians.[4]

PMB members also found themselves being attacked on the street, and accusations flew that they received Israeli funds to undermine the PLO.[5] They risked becoming extremely unpopular if they did not enter into the spirit of the growing popular resistance movement.

Of course there was also a growing mood within the PMB itself that the Israeli occupation was getting out of hand and had to be confronted. Indeed it was this growing mood that had led members to leave the Muslim Brotherhood and form Islamic Jihad in the first place, and there were plenty within the Brotherhood's ranks ready to take up arms immediately. [6] Thus, to appease growing demands for resistance and accusations of inactivism, the PMB set up Hamas.

Consolidation (1987-1993) and Resistance (1993-2006): Relations with the PA

During the Intifada, Hamas consolidated its position as a popular resistance embedded in Palestinian society. However it is at end of the intifada that its relationship with its rivals becomes more revealing. After the peace process began with the Oslo Accords of 1993, Hamas felt threatened being, as it was, an armed resistance movement.[7] It also noted the inherent flaws of Oslo, interpreting it as a Zionist ploy to rule the Palestinians through a puppet government.[8] It thus saw the Palestinian Authority (PA) as its main competitor and committed itself to armed resistance against Israel.

Arafat knew that the Islamic movements challenged his dominance in Palestine; during and after the 1st Intifada he even tried to give Fatah itself an Islamic flavour to counter this.[9] But he knew demonstrating that he was a good Muslim would not be enough. Arafat thus came to Oslo intending to show that he and the PLO were the party to lead the Palestinians to statehood, and that the Islamic groups would bring unending violence. By accepting Oslo, Arafat could secure financial and political support from Israel whilst at the same time illustrating to the Palestinians that progress was being made and that Hamas was not the way forward. During the 90s – the “Oslo period” – Hamas' popularity swung violently, faltering when the peace process met Palestinian expectations, and increasing when it didn't.[10]

Israel created the PA partly to crackdown on Hamas. Bombings by Hamas as it attempted to wreck the Oslo process, such as those in Afula in 1994, Beit Lid in 1995 and multiple suicide missions in 1996 and 1998 therefore brought Hamas into direct conflict with Fatah. As soon as the PA came to power 400 Hamas activists were arrested in the Gaza Strip.[11] In late 1994, clashes occurred between Fatah and supporters at the Gaza Palestine Mosque, leaving 14 dead. In 1995, a large explosion in Gaza which killed seven was widely blamed, accurately or not on Fatah.[12] These actions came under pressure from Israel to bring about its own security; from Israel's point of view that had been the entire point of Oslo.

When the Oslo Process came to an end with the Camp David Accords, its flaws exposed, the PA was increasingly seen as a participant in Israel's “ploy”, a view which Hamas had been encouraging all along, e.g. by refusing to participate in 1996 PA elections.[13] Even supporters of the PA, who viewed Arafat's involvement with Israel as being well-intentioned, perceived that Hamas had been right all along, foreseeing the futility of Oslo. After the outbreak of the 2nd Intifada, Hamas led the resistance, emerging afterwards, in contrast to Fatah and the PA, as an organisation untarnished by internal corruption, accusations of conspiring with Israel and an out of touch, elderly leadership.[14] Having overtaken Fatah in this phase of the competition, it was now ready to expand its control and legitimacy within the Territories.[15]

Governance (2006 –): Fatah and other Dissenting Voices

Despite this competition, from the mid-90s another voice was being heard inside Hamas – a voice of moderation.

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Some began to feel Hamas should act alongside the PA – despite their suspect regime, they were after all, a Palestinian movement – and it was important to Palestinians themselves, not to mention many within Hamas too, that attempts at unity be made. This voice was heard in emerging figures such Ahmad Bahhar, Ismail Haniyya and Khalid al-Hindi.[16]

However, the rift between Hamas and Fatah came to a head with Hamas' election in the Gaza Strip. Following skirmishes and riots between supporters of the two factions, Saudi Arabia attempted to mediate through The Mecca Accords in 2007, setting up a Palestinian National Unity Government.[17] Unfortunately for its prospects, the 2nd Intifada had not ended with a change in the PA's mission to crack down on Hamas, nor with a willingness to compromise its own power anywhere in Palestine.[18] The large contingent of Fatah security forces in Gaza therefore hindered Hamas' operations and posed a looming threat if Fatah ever decided to be overtly aggressive. Hamas knew that the ceasefire could never last, and fighting broke out again, resulting in the disintegration of Fatah forces. Hamas had control of Gaza.

There have been other challenges. There is of course Islamic Jihad who, whilst small in size often increase tension between Israel and Hamas through their independent actions, but there is also a growing threat from the emergence of Salafi-Jihadist groups.[19] In August 2009, the spiritual leader of Jund Ansar Allah (Army of God) declared a separate Islamic Emirate in Palestine and demanded the imposition of Sharia' Law from their headquarters in Rafah.[20] Hamas repressed this dissent, leaving many dead and the near collapse of the movement.

There are also a huge range of other groups, some no larger than a hundred members.[21] They perceive Hamas' resistance as having faltered through attempts at ceasefires. By joining the democratic PA, some say it is out of touch with its true Islamic heritage, whilst others complain that its imposition of Sharia' law has only been partial. Significantly, the threat not only comes from a general mood within Gaza, but also draws members of Hamas' itself, particularly extreme elements of the Military Wing.

As yet the threat is small but could replace the diminishing challenge of Fatah. It illustrates that Hamas must struggle to maintain its unity, a theme that will be examined in more detail later.

2) Relations with Israel

Hamas' commitment to challenging the PA and leading the resistance has led to violent antagonism and escalation with Israel. Hamas' actions, aims and its Islamic credentials have led Israel to view them solely within the context of an increasingly Islamic Middle East emphasised by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and heightened security after 9/11. Israel has thus been unwilling to give Hamas any concessions and has always sought to destroy it. It is important to Hamas that they are not seen as backing down to Israeli force to preserve their credibility as the resistance leaders, indeed being at the receiving end of Israeli action continues to unite many Palestinians behind it.

Israel's role in the formation and consolidation of Hamas (1980s-1993)

As mentioned earlier, it was Israel's 1967 occupation and subsequent right wing settlement and economic policies that played a significant role in radicalising the Islamic consciousness in Palestine and the creation of Hamas.

But Israel's perception of Hamas played a significant role in shaping its political structure too. Hamas' involvement in the 1st Intifada led Israeli authorities to arrest over 1500 Hamas members.[22] Amongst them was Sheikh Yassin,

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one of Hamas' founders. These arrests threatened to destroy the emerging organisation, which found increasing numbers of its leadership and most committed members in prison.[23]

Abu Marzouq immediately formulated a new strategy of survival should Hamas face such a challenge again.[24] Military action would henceforth be separated from the administrative and societal bodies of Hamas by forming independently functioning cells under the authority of a separate military wing, the Qassam Brigades. There would be an internal leadership which resided in Gaza and an external Political Bureau which resided first in Amman, but later in Damascus, after relations began to improve between Jordan and Israel in 1993.[25] The importance of these different leaderships will become apparent later when considering Hamas' internal relations and the importance of unity.

As a result, later attacks and arrests put Hamas in the limelight for many Palestinians, but did not fatally damage Hamas as they had before until the 2nd Intifada. Throughout the 1990s, Hamas' popularity ensured a steady flow of volunteers and Israel's aim of destroying Hamas' leadership only strengthened Hamas' status and resolve in leading the resistance.

Resistance: (1993-2006) Antagonism and Escalation

Another factor that characterised Hamas' actions during the 1990s was its commitment to vengeance to illustrate its role as leading the resistance. The Goldstein Massacre in 1994, for example, sparked (or excused) a wave of Hamas attacks.[26] However, the assassination of Hamas' leaders in response to their reprisals for such actions has often caused waves of anger across Palestine in support of Hamas. It is important to note though that if the Palestinians mood becomes out of touch with sustained aggression, or this position becomes damaging to Hamas itself, Hamas has been willing to back down, e.g. offering ceasefires towards the end of the 2nd Intifada.[27]

The attempt to destroy Hamas' leadership was also another reason for its attempts at a ceasefire towards the end of the 2nd Intifada. Assassination attempts created a personal vendetta within Hamas amongst those left behind whose close colleagues had been killed by Mossad. The failed attempt on Mishal's life in Jordan in 1997 and the assassinations of Qassam leaders such as Sharif and the Awadallah brothers in 1998 and of Yassin in 2004 also stirred up Palestinian sympathy in favour of Hamas.[28] Many of the leadership's children have also been killed while their fathers have been left to carry on the fight. However, by the end of the 2nd Intifada in 2004, almost the entire senior leadership within Gaza had been killed, threatening to tear the movement apart.

These attacks also strengthened Palestinians support for Hamas, but this was not unconditional. The attendance at Sheikh Yassin's funeral in 2004 by 200,000 Palestinians illustrates the support Hamas received – no high-profile Fatah leaders had been killed by bombing raids and troubled by the attack, John Negroponte a US representative to the UN said that “the killing of Sheikh Yassin has escalated tensions in Gaza and the greater Middle East, and sets back our effort to resume progress towards peace.” [29] However, at the same time, Hamas was worried just how much violence the Palestinians could endure, from 2003-2004 Palestinian deaths had increased by 35% from 637 to 866 and Israel's resolve was only hardening.[30]

The ceasefires Hamas did offer though were on terms unacceptable to Israel. Towards the end of the 2nd Intifada for example, plans offering a 10 year cease-fire plan were offered in exchange for a return to the 1967 borders, pre-occupation. This would include a Palestinian State in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem as well as a long term commitment to “the right of return”. Similar cease-fire offers were made in the following years but Israel believes that demands would not stop there it sees Hamas as an extremist, Pan-Islamic group set on its destruction.

Israel's perception of Hamas and the consequent effect on Hamas in Governance (2006 –)

This stance and Israel's rejection of the ceasefire offers evidence of a general Israeli approach to Palestine, the Arab states and Islamism post-1979 and post-9/11, but particularly after Hamas' election victory.[31] In popular Israeli memory, Hamas' actions in the 1990s directly followed the left's attempts under Rabin to find a peaceful solution, and led to an important change in Israeli politics and society. Hamas has played a central role in cementing a hostile,

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paranoid attitude to Palestinians since the 1990s, and is portrayed in Israel and by Israel to the West as a Pan-Islamic group embedded in a close relationship with Iran and al-Qaeda affiliates across the Middle East.[32] Israel perceives itself as being in the frontline in the war on terror against this network of affiliates, a view which only increased further as Hamas began to emulate Hezbollah's tactics of firing rockets into Israel during the 2nd Intifada.[33]

This has had consequences in internal Israeli politics. Oslo, the child of Rabin's left-wing government was and is seen as conceding to terrorists. Consequently, (of course there are other factors too) the left consistently manages to attain only around 15% of the vote in Israeli elections.[34] The right's (who respond aggressively to Hamas' actions and rhetoric) domination of Israeli politics has pushed the prospects of a dialogue further into the shadows. Its policy is simply to destroy Hamas' presence in Palestine. Any ceasefire offers will be met with a high degree of scepticism.

This policy continued after Hamas' 2006 election victory with increasing fervour. Israel's mission has been to break Hamas' hold on power in the Gaza Strip without decreasing security for Israelis living in range of their rocket attacks. The Gaza disengagement plan which began in 2004, dismantling settlements along the way, was updated in 2006 after Hamas' election with a policy of starving Hamas out of power. The Israeli controlled Karni crossing into Israel severely limited transport, bringing the economy to its knees.[35]

Hamas' response in June 2006, a raid on the Kerem Shalom military base and the capture of the soldier Gilad Shalit, along with Israel's failure against Hezbollah in Lebanon exacerbated the existing tension.[36] The apparent Islamic alliance became clearer in Israeli officials' eyes as pictures of Hassan Nasrallah sprang up around Gaza. Although Egypt managed to broker a cease fire in the summer of 2008, its inability to tackle the root causes of the growing tension or its inability to meet the aims of either side merely signalled to Hamas and Israel that violence was the only way to achieve their aims.

Israel's further failure against Hamas in 2009 with Operation Cast Lead after Hamas had again begun its rocket attacks in response to the siege means tension is still high.[37] Neither side has achieved any of their aims since 2006. Hamas is still in power and the blockade is still in place.

However it is Hamas' commitment to leading an aggressive resistance and Israel's interpretation of this as a Pan-Islamic plot to destroy it that has led to this impasse.

3) The Different Ideological Commitments of Hamas

This section focuses mainly on the Governance Phase since 2006, as this is when Hamas' focus on unity is clearest, but briefly examines the background to this development from 1987-2006.

As illustrated in the previous sections, Hamas seeks to lead the resistance movement against Israel without provoking a response that would fatally cripple them. What is also clear though is that there are many different opinions within Hamas as to how to approach this. Since 2006 Hamas has faced further challenges as a governing body – many have questioned whether it is compromising its Islamic credentials in favour of democracy, whilst others complain that they do not want to be governed by extreme political Islam. To maintain unity and its position at the head of the Palestinian movement, Hamas has to court all of these different demands. As a result, Hamas' focus on unity sometimes seems like ideological contradiction.

As explained earlier, Hamas is made up of independently functioning leaderships: the internal, external and military. Each one courts a different group of people who make different demands of Hamas. Very generally, the external leadership has to pose as more extreme when securing resources from Iran and Syria, whilst appearing more moderate when seeking a relationship with Europe. The internal leadership however needs to convince the Palestinian people that it can make a difference to their lives. This means meeting violence with violence, but also working towards a long-term solution, resistance to injustice, but not war without end. The military wing however

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attracts the more extreme elements of Palestinian society and it is here that the voices of extreme Pan-Islamism are often heard.

We therefore don't only hear different opinions coming from different people, but different opinions coming from the same people as they try to accommodate competing views. They do so as the situation demands it, giving us a complex tapestry of comments across Hamas' history.

Formation, Consolidation and Resistance (1987 – 2006)

The first ideological commitment by Hamas was its founding Charter, released during the 1st Intifada. This document aimed to assert the status of Palestine as Islamic land[38] that was to be liberated from Israel through violence.[39] A rushed and rather botched job, even at the time it embarrassed the high leadership with its talk of freemasons and global conspiracies.[40] The Charter's aims are also vague and abstract "Hamas aims to conquer evil." [41] Contrast this with Mishal's proficient understanding of international history and politics today, [42] and we see a huge difference.

The high leadership had immediately recognised the folly of an all out, never ending Jihad. Instead of actively pursuing the Charter, in practice they adopted a "policy of stages" inherited from the PLO[43] giving their actions and statements a pragmatic tone. Indeed, as early as 1993, Sheikh Yassin had written an open letter offering the possibility of a long term ceasefire.[44]

Though characterised by pragmatism, the political structure has given rise to various views within the movement. The 1996 elections issue were illustrative of how Hamas is forced to straddle different positions.

The offer to participate in the 1996 elections was received positively by many within the internal Gaza leadership, but rejected by those in the external leadership.[45] The Gaza leadership possibly saw a chance to gain more influence in their territory, whilst the external leadership, under pressure from their external sponsors, saw any entrance into the PA as selling out to Israel. The issue was resolved by four bomb attacks in March that year, increasing tensions and making electoral participation impossible. The attacks however were carried out by an unknown cell and were brought to an end by an order from the Qassam Brigades leadership, who nevertheless stated that the actions came from outside their jurisdiction. This was then confirmed by Muhammad Nazzal in Amman.[46] As the Gaza leadership grew angry at having been bypassed, the Qassam Brigades then changed their tune warning of more attacks to come. It seemed that both the external and internal leaderships were vying for the loyalty of the Qassam Brigades.

Episodes such as this threatened to tear Hamas apart. With the release of Rantisi, Marzouq and Sheikh Yassin in the following years, stressing the unity of the movement became increasingly important to the Hamas leadership. Given its fragility, it is this idea of unity that has come to dominate Hamas' ideology in recent years.[47]

Governance (2006 –)

The challenge of how to approach Israel was combined in 2006 with the challenge of how to govern. The issues of democracy and Islam have been added to those of long term peace treaties and negotiations with Israel.[48] The following passage illustrates Hamas' committing or condoning extreme and moderate positions depending on what audience it is trying to please.

Hamas has done well to recognise the power of international sympathy when Israel acts aggressively. By presenting itself as more moderate than the Israeli characterisation does, Hamas presents itself as a victim. Mishal has even gone so far as to have a contributor's profile on the Guardian Newspaper's website.[49] Similarly in interviews with journalists and academics he is keen to stress he represents a moderate Islamic movement that ultimately aims at

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peace and freedom for its people. In one interview he says “we encourage freedom of opinion, we practice international democracy”.^[50] In another he sets out that the responsibility for beginning a peace plan lies with Israel, “It is indisputable that negotiating with the enemy is not rejected” ^[51] explaining that resistance is a means to an end, not the purpose of Hamas, although he then says that “we refuse to recognise the legitimacy of Israel because we refuse to recognise the legitimacy of occupation and theft of land.”^[52] Mahmoud al-Zahar, Hamas’ Foreign Minister has also accepted the possibility of negotiations, saying that no peace plan “can succeed unless we are sitting around a table without any pre-conditions”.^[53]

It is unlikely that this is empty talk either; Hamas’ pragmatic policy of stages was mentioned earlier. However, another challenge halts its progress towards moderation. Commentators have been obsessed with the rather irrelevant Hamas Charter which, as already noted is out of touch with the way in which the Hamas leadership think. But it may not be out of touch with how many of its grassroots members think, especially those in the Qassam Brigades, despite the fact that it may not be well-known amongst them. Hroub suggests Hamas is reluctant to abandon the Charter as it believes this would be interpreted as bowing to Israeli pressure and meeting Israeli pre-conditions,^[54] “If I were to tell you that the charter could be changed it would immediately be interpreted as a concession and as a collapse of Hamas’ principles”^[55] says al-Zahar. To the extreme members within Hamas this would be an appalling development, one that could split the movement in two, and Hamas is perhaps wary of losing members from its military wing to the slowly emerging, small Salafi-Jihadist movements.

Problems of unity also stem from the moderate concessions Hamas makes to a population which generally does not want to be forced into the excesses of political Islamism. For example, in 2007, a senior official declared that Hamas would force women to cover up.^[56] The statement provoked a women’s demonstration and was swiftly withdrawn. That is not to say that society is becoming secular, indeed it is becoming more religious, particularly in the Gaza Strip. What is relevant here is that Hamas responds to popular feelings. Indeed in a leaked document from the International Crisis Group, it was stated that “If negotiations [with Israel] reached a suitable agreement and a popular referendum approved it, then we would of course accept” ^[57] But by appealing to its Palestinian constituency and to European sympathies in this way, i.e. through moderation and democratic principles, Hamas risks offending the extreme elements within Gaza (which reject democracy and only partial application of Sharia’ law) which is perhaps why it has not committed entirely.

While it is hard to pin down Hamas’ exact ideological position, it is likely that many of the comments in favour of moderation and democracy are indeed genuine and not mere political spin. We can perhaps place Hamas within the wider context of the trend within many other Islamist movements towards an acceptance of some aspects of democracy, the argument being that the voice of God should be heard through the voice of the people. This certainly presents one solution to how Hamas is to straddle Islamism and democracy.

Thus to counter the vast array of opinions present in Hamas, the leadership must make ideological concessions on many issues and the willingness to do so illustrates that above all, Hamas is concerned with unity rather than dogma.

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Conclusion

To understand Hamas' evolution, I have analysed its main relationships in a thematic context: formation (1940s-1987), consolidation (1987-1993), resistance (1993-2006) and governance (2006- the present).

Hamas' pragmatism throughout each of these phases stems from its desire to lead the Palestinian resistance against Israel. To maintain its popularity and thereby survive to achieve this in the face of the wide array of opinions it faces, of fundamental importance has been the idea of unity throughout the movement.

Its competitiveness was illustrated by its struggle with Fatah, ending with its election in Gaza and its place within hearts and minds as the leader of the resistance. It opposed Fatah as a challenge to its power base and as a stooge of Israel, a perfect example of Hamas' pragmatism and its inherent ideological commitments. But this, and its commitment to Islamism, has led Israel to seek Hamas' destruction and shun its attempts at negotiations.

Of course Hamas ultimately wishes for the end of Israel and the liberation of Palestine, but it thinks almost exclusively in short term goals and is open to the possibility of entering into negotiations. It is also possible that the more moderate elements really believe the two peoples can co-exist. The dominant view in Israel however seeks to stop Hamas getting any more of a foothold in Palestine than it already does, seeing its voices of moderation as a veil to hide its Pan-Islamist alliance with Iran and al-Qaeda.

Underpinning all these relationships is an ever-evolving, volatile ideology and a membership with a wide array of opinions. Through all the differing positions though, earlier analysis illustrates that the leadership undoubtedly have a deep commitment to being what their constituency want them to be – the problem is that its constituency is so divided. As well as this leadership and representation, Hamas is of course also committed to the freedom of Palestine. What exactly this means, i.e. whether a return to the 1967 borders is really ultimately acceptable to the majority of Hamas, is as yet unclear.

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[1] A full examination of Hamas would require a further examination of its international relations, for example it's courting of Europe, its difficulties with the US, its complicated relationship with Syria and Iran, funding from the Arab world and how it uniquely fits into the wider array of underground Islamic organisations. However, this is beyond the scope of this essay

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