

**Transforming Hamas.
Risk Analysis on the Transition from
a Terrorist Organization to a Political Party**

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Motto

*„Allah is its goal, the prophet
is its model, the Koran is its
constitution, jihad is its path and death
for the sake of Allah is its most coveted
desire”*

(Hamas leader)

Abstract

The present study aims to construct a risk analysis of Hamas' transition from a terrorist organization to a political party in the context of the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections. The main argument of the paper is that this transition may constitute a risk to the Palestinian political system, as it generates threats that could materialize in considerable damage at a systemic level. In order to accomplish this goal we employ a qualitative method of risk analysis developed by RAND Corporation in order to measure terrorist risk, which is entitled TRAM (Terrorist Risk Analysis Method) and which we will attempt to adapt in order to satisfy the methodological requirements of this paper.

Keywords: terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, political party, TRAM.

I. Theoretical overview:

The need for such a paper appeared in the absence of relevant studies in this field. Although, there are a significant number of scholars who have studied the transition of terrorist organizations (especially Islamist groups) to political parties their work was not aimed at elaborating a structured and comprehensive framework of analysis that would enable the measurement of risks associated with this process. The most important of these researchers are: Khaled Hroub, Alastair Crooke, Beverly Milton-Edwards, Shaul Mishal și Avraham Sela, Matthew Lewitt, Robert Satloff and Martin Kramer.

The arguments put forth by these scholars vary considerably, encompassing the entire spectrum of possible approaches, from the ultra-optimist perspective of Khaled Hroub, who is a staunch supporter of Islamist participation on the political arena (as this would lead to moderation) to the pessimist perspective of Robert Satloff, who depicts the official acknowledgement of Hamas' transformation into a legitimate political party as a grave error, considering the terrorist background of this organization.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable difference of perspective between authors such as Beverley Milton-Edward, a scholar coming from the academic field who employs a theoretical framework of analysis and Matthew Lewitt, former member of an American intelligence organization who displays a pragmatic approach focusing on the tactical and strategic elements.

For a better understanding of the current debates surrounding the issue of Islamist participation in elections we will briefly summarize the main arguments brought by these scholars. According to Khaled Hroub, the presence of Hamas on the Palestinian political arena can be considered a positive evolution because it will lead to the creation of a system of checks and balances within the Palestinian political system. The large number of votes received by Hamas is a proof of the high level of popular support enjoyed by this organization, which Hroub considers to be an incentive for Hamas to act in the best interest of its supporters. Moreover, Hamas' integration will lead to an increase in the level of political pluralism within the Palestinian Territories, Hamas acting as a viable alternative to the already consolidated secular parties¹.

In Alastair Crooke and Beverley Milton-Edwards's view the peace with Israel can only be reached with the help of strong popular support, which implies the active participation of all important political actors in the

¹ Khaled Hroub, "A 'New Hamas' through its New Documents", *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 35, no.4, Summer 2006, p. 6.

Palestinian Territories. Therefore, Hamas' transition to a political party can be considered the first step towards achieving this goal. It is important to mention that Hamas has undergone a significant ideological transformation, materialized in the elaboration of a political program that is significantly different from its 1988 Charter. Both scholars believe it is not possible to make accurate predictions on the future impact of Islamist organizations on the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, albeit it is clear that preserving the current socio-political conditions will only lead to an increase in the power of attraction of Islamist ideology for the Palestinian people².

On the other hand, Robert Satloff warns about the perils of allowing Hamas to participate in peace negotiations as a legitimate partner, for he believes this organization will never officially acknowledge the state of Israel. Terrorist organizations lack the capacity of transforming themselves, although they can sometimes display a certain strategic flexibility and occasional moderation. Once in power, Hamas will start by fighting corruption and improving social services, but at the same time it will gradually attempt to Islamize the Palestinian society. In conclusion it is Satloff's belief that Hamas' electoral victory will lead the Palestinian political system away from the path of democracy³.

A similar position is adopted by Matthew Levitt who has emphasized the fact that Hamas' participation in the electoral process is nothing but an efficient method of achieving its main objectives – undermining the secular authority and achieving the complete islamization of the Palestinian society⁴.

The same argument is embraced by Martin Kramer who characterizes Hamas' ideological transformation as simple rhetoric. Moreover, the readiness in winning the elections allowed Hamas to preserve intact its military wing, so that it now has the ability to achieve three of its main objectives: eliminating Fatah from the Palestinian political arena, islamizing Palestinian society and

² Alastair Crooke, Beverley Milton-Edwards, "Elusive Ingredient: Hamas and the Peace Process", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 39-52, p. 42.

³ Robert Satloff, "Hamas Triumphant: Implications for Security, Politics, Economy and Strategy", *Policy Focus*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, no. 53, February 2006, pp. 1-63, p. 5.

⁴ Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006, p. 240.

imposing its own political project (especially in what concerns Palestine's relations with Israel)⁵.

Based on the aforementioned arguments we have attempted to identify the main threats generated by Hamas' transition to a political party and establish correlations with the perceived vulnerabilities of the Palestinian political system, while evaluating the possible consequences issuing from the materialization of these threats.

To the best of our knowledge there are no risk analyses on the transition of terrorist organization to political parties, albeit there are numerous such studies addressing the terrorist threat in a wide variety of fields, such as critical infrastructure, nuclear attacks and the protection of classified information. In this respect, RAND Corporation has distinguished itself as a center for research, developing a multitude of efficient analytical tools, including the TRAM method applied in this paper.

II. Conceptual delimitations:

The current study employs two fundamental concepts: *terrorist organization* and *political party*, which we will proceed to explain in order to facilitate the understanding of the arguments presented further on. As the academic community has not yet reached a consensus on the meaning of the two concepts, we will include here several short definitions in the attempt to identify the distinct characteristics of each.

There are multiple definitions for the concept "political party", albeit the prevalent ones belong to Max Weber, George Bourdeau and Dimitrie Gusti (in Romanian sociology). According to Max Weber, political parties are "*associations in which membership rests on formally free recruitment. The end to which its activity is devoted is to secure power within an organization for its leader in order to attain ideal or material advantages for its active members*"⁶.

Georges Burdeau in his *Traité de science politique* defines political parties as a group of individuals, sharing the same political views who strive to impose a point of view that would attract large number of citizens and to obtain power or at least influence it.

⁵ <http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/2006/03/power-will-not-moderate-hamas/> accessed on 28.06.2011.

⁶ Max Weber apud Richard Swedberg, Ola Ageball, *The Max Weber Dictionary. Key words and central concepts*, Stanford University Press, 2005, p.194;

Finally, Dimitrie Gusti considered political parties to be organizations whose final objectives are influencing state power, in view of promoting the political, economic, ideological, cultural interests of some groups, social classes, local, ethnical and religious communities⁷.

All these definitions enable us to conclude that the main characteristics of political parties are the following: they form and act on the basis of voluntarism, their activity is focused on acquiring, preserving, exercising, controlling and influencing political power, they have organizational and leadership structures, their activity is based on a political program and they display social mobility (entry and exit of members is allowed).

On the other hand the attempt to define the concept “*terrorist organization*” poses even more difficulties, because of the controversies surrounding this phenomenon. The Webster Dictionary provides a broad definition of the concept, stating that an organization is defined as terrorist when it resorts to violent means to fulfill a set of political objectives⁸.

Although political parties and terrorist organizations are both forms of political organization, the difference between the two are significant, especially in what concerns the instruments they employ and the objectives proposed. While political parties represent peaceful forms of political activity (at least in the case of parties active in democratic regimes), terrorist organizations employ illegal violent means both against state authorities and civilians⁹.

However, in spite of these conceptual differences, reality shows us that drawing a clear-cut line between the two types of organization is often a challenge. This difficulty is illustrated by the example of the Japanese terrorist organization, Aum Shinrikyo, which for a short period of time had been involved both in selecting and promoting candidates for local elections and in organizing the Sarin gas terrorist attack at the Tokyo underground¹⁰.

Another point of convergence between the two types of organizations can be identified by drawing up a short analysis of their historical origins. Hence, on the European continent political parties and modern terrorist

⁷ Dimitrie Gusti, *Partidul politic. Sociologia unui sistem al partidului politic*, in "Doctrina politice contemporane", Cultura Națională Publishing House, Bucharest, 1926, p.4.

⁸ <http://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/terrorist%20organization> accessed on 26.06.2001.

⁹ Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, Arie Perliger, *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*, Routledge, 2009, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2.

organizations have developed in parallel starting with the last decades of the 19th century, while in Africa and the Middle East the appearance of the two organizations is intimately connected with the fight for autonomy and liberty after the end of colonialism¹¹.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise the fact that there have been numerous cases in which a successful transition between the two types of organizations has been accomplished (from a political party to a terrorist organization and the other way around).

Although there isn't a lot of data available on this subject, scholars such as Leonard Weinberg and Ami Pedahzur have managed to identify four factors which could lead to such a transition: transformation of the political regime, state repression, problems inherent to the nature of their enterprise, amnesty offered by governments to individuals and groups willing to give up violence and participate in the conventional political process¹².

III. Political context

On January 25th 2006 elections were held for the Palestinian Legislative Council, the legislative body of the Palestinian Authority. These were the first elections for the PLC after 1996 as they had been repeatedly postponed due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the elections participated voters from the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem¹³.

Final results showed that Hamas had won 44.45 percent of the votes compared to the ruling-Fatah's 41.43 percent. This meant that Hamas had a majority of 132 available seats which enabled it to form its own government having a parliamentary majority. The Palestinian Prime-Minister in place then, Ahmed Qurei resigned, but at the request of President Mahmoud Abbas preserved his seat until February 19th, when Hamas leader, Ismail Haniya formed a new government¹⁴.

Following the elections, the Quartet (US, UN, EU and Russia) threatened to cut funds to the Palestinian Authority if Hamas did not recognize Israel, disarm and reject terrorism¹⁵.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 21.

¹³ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/palestine/pa-elections2006.htm> accessed on 26.06.2011.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

Hamas' decision to participate in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections surprised many analysts, especially as Hamas did not participate in the 2004 presidential elections, following the death of Yasser Arafat. Nevertheless, the group achieved very good results in the 2005 municipal elections, receiving almost half of the total number of votes, a result which encouraged them to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections. The decision was publicly announced in March 2005 and shortly afterwards the electoral platform of the Change and Reform Party (the name under which Hamas participated in the elections) was drafted. The platform begins with a political justification concerning the organization's change of stance¹⁶.

Therefore the first four paragraphs of the Electoral platform's preamble are entirely devoted to explaining the logic behind Hamas' decision to enter the Palestinian political arena. Several arguments are listed, the most important of them being the need to defend Islam, the duty to reform the Palestinian reality and alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people, the desire to shield the people from corruption as well as to strengthen national unity and Palestinian internal affairs¹⁷.

Moreover, Hamas argues that this decision is a part of their strategy to liberate the Palestinian Territories and accomplish the return of the Palestinian people. The Change and Reform Party will endeavor to build an advanced Palestinian civil society based on political pluralism and the rotation of power¹⁸.

The fourteen-page electoral platform of the Change and Reform Party is the broadest and the most detailed presentation of Hamas' political vision. The preamble is followed by 17 articles and a separate section entitled "*Our Principles*": internal politics, external relations, administrative reform and fighting corruption, legislative policy and reforming the judiciary, public freedoms and citizen rights, education policy, religious guidance and preaching, social policy, media and culture policies, women, children and family issues, youth issues, housing policy, health and environment policy, agriculture policy, economic, financial and fiscal policies, labor issues and transport and border crossings¹⁹.

¹⁶ Khaled Hroub, "A 'New Hamas' through its New Documents", *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol. 35, no.4, Summer 2006, p.6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

IV. Terrorist Risk-Analysis Method (TRAM)

Terrorism risk can be viewed as having three components: the *threat* to a target, the target's *vulnerability* to the threat and the *consequences* should the target be successfully attacked.

Threat

People and institutions can constitute threats when they have both the intention and the capability of damaging a target. The threat to a target is the probability that a specific target is attacked in a specific way during a specified period. Neither intentions without capabilities nor capabilities without intentions pose a threat. Threat only exists when both are manifested together in a person or organization²⁰.

Measure (Threat): *The probability that a specific target is attacked in a specific way during a specified time period, or*

$$\text{Threat} = P(\text{attack occurs})^{21}$$

A complete description of all possible threats to which a target is exposed would be almost impossible to elaborate, as it should take into consideration all the possible types of attacks. Furthermore, we should take into consideration the fact that measuring threat includes a high level of uncertainty²².

After acquiring political power following the 2006 Palestinian elections and its transformation into a political party, Hamas' actions can materialize into threats towards the Palestinian political system. The organization fulfills the two necessary criteria which determine its inclusion in the category of threat: intentions and capabilities.

Hence, an analysis of the organization's 1988 Charter reveals the group's Islamist character and its intentions to transform Palestine into an Islamic state by using all available means, including jihad. Its transition to a political party and the success in the 2006 elections have led to the fulfillment of the second criteria, as Hamas began to have access to the necessary resources for implementing its political vision.

²⁰ Henry H. Willis, Andrew R. Morral, Terrence K. Kelly, Jamison Jo Medby, *Estimating Terrorist Risk*, Rand Center for Terrorism Risk Management Policy, 2005, p. 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

The target in this case is the Palestinian political system, which starting with 2006 is exposed to a series of threats generated by Hamas' transition from a terrorist organization to a political party.

A first possible threat is represented by the adoption of measures which may lead to the islamization of the Palestinian society. One of the main instruments necessary for the materialization of this threat is the introduction of the Sharia (the Islamic law) as the official law of the state. At present, secularism is very present in the Palestinian society, which distinguishes itself also through a tolerant religious climate. The systemic damage in this case is represented by the appearance of an intolerant religious climate, the outbreak of inter-confessional conflicts and violations of civil rights and liberties.

The second major threat is represented by the possible transformation of the Palestinian Territories into a rogue-state. As a ruling party, Hamas can refuse to conform to international norms in the field of human rights, as well as adopt an unyielding stance during the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Such an evolution will destabilize even more the already fragile political equilibrium in the region, increasing the probability of another military conflict between Israel and Hamas on the model of the previous ones. The human and economic costs of such a conflict would be great, leading to a possible collapse of the Palestinian political system. Moreover, the group can resort to state resources in order to financially and logistically support the activity of Islamist groups in the region while at the same time transforming the Palestinian Territories into safe havens for terrorists forced into exile from their own countries.

The last threat is the transition towards authoritarianism of the current political regime in Palestine. With the help of the recently acquired political power Hamas can attempt to impose an authoritarian or even dictatorial regime, in the attempt of eliminating its political adversaries (especially secular nationalist parties). The main damage in this case is represented by the elimination of political pluralism and the deceleration or even surcease of democratic transition in Palestine.

Vulnerability

In Haimes' opinion, vulnerability is the manifestation of the inherent states of the system (e.g., physical, technical, organizational, cultural) that can result in damage if attacked by an adversary. A target's vulnerability

can be articulated as the probability that an attack of a given type will be successful once it has been launched²³.

Measure (Vulnerability): *The probability that damages (where damages may involve fatalities, injuries, property damage, or other consequences) occur, given a specific attack type, at a specific time, on a given target, or*

Vulnerability = $P(\text{attack results in damage} \mid \text{attack occurs})$ ²⁴

It is important to mention that when using TRAM, the magnitude of the damage incurred is not important, as we are employing a simplified understanding of the concept “vulnerability”, in which an attack is considered successful if it produces damage and failed if it does not.

In the present study, the vulnerabilities identified at the level of the Palestinian society can be associated to all the threats mentioned as resulting from Hamas’ transition to a political party. Therefore, the action of introducing measures that will lead to the islamization of the Palestinian society and the transformation of Palestine into a rogue state can have a high level of success considering the fact that Palestinian institutions are not based on a democratic tradition, they are recently created and as such are very vulnerable because of the special status of the Palestinian Territories (they do not have complete independence or sovereignty).

Moreover, there are no coherent legal provisions regarding the separation of powers and the role played by religion in political life.

Another vulnerability that could increase the rate of success of Hamas’ attempt to Islamize Palestinian society or make the transition towards authoritarianism is the large popular support enjoyed by the organization. Hence, Hamas can achieve its objectives without having to face popular resistance.

Consequences

“*Consequence*” is defined as the magnitude and type of damage resulting from successful terrorist attacks²⁵.

Measure (Consequence): *The expected magnitude of damage (e.g., deaths, injuries, or property damage), given a specific attack type, at a specific time, that results in damage to a specific target or,*

²³ Haimes apud Henry H. Willis, Andrew R. Morral, Terrence K. Kelly, Jamison Jo Medby, *Estimating Terrorist Risk*, Rand Center for Terrorism Risk Management Policy, 2005, p. 7.

²⁴ Henry H. Willis, Andrew R. Morral, Terrence K. Kelly, Jamison Jo Medby, *Estimating Terrorist Risk*, Rand Center for Terrorism Risk Management Policy, 2005, p. 7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.8.

Consequence = E(damage | attack occurs and results in damage)²⁶

Consequences can be expressed in terms of fatalities, injuries, economic losses, or other types of damage. They are influenced by a wide variety of factors, which are difficult to measure due to the high level of uncertainty²⁷.

The threats generated by Hamas' transformation into a political party can have both political and symbolic consequences. For example, the increase in the number of Islamic fundamentalists in the Palestinian Territories and even the increase of the Muslim population (as a result of forced conversions or the appearance of a climate of religious intolerance), the decrease in the number of political parties (process of elimination of political opponents), increase in the number of Islamist organizations and/or terrorist on the territory of the Palestinian state and in its proximity.

Furthermore, the actions of Hamas can generate human casualties and property damage, in the case of an outbreak of inter-confessional conflicts or military clashes with the State of Israel.

Consequently, risk can be defined as a function of threat, vulnerability and consequences.

Measure (Terrorism Risk): *The expected consequence of an existent threat, which for a given target, attack mode, and damage type can be expressed as*

$$\text{Risk} = P(\text{attack occurs})$$

$$* P(\text{attack results in damage} \mid \text{attack occurs})$$

$$* E(\text{damage} \mid \text{attack occurs and results in damage})$$

$$= \text{Threat} * \text{Vulnerability} * \text{Consequence}^{28}$$

In other words, terrorism risk represents the expected consequences of attacks taking into account the likelihood that attacks occur and that they are successful if attempted²⁹.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

V. Existent mechanisms for countering the identified risks:

The Palestinian society has a tradition of religious tolerance, which makes it impervious to attempts of islamization.

On the other hand, Hamas is well-known for its social work. The majority of experts in the field agree that from its beginnings, Hamas had a dual structure: a military wing coordinating the organization of terrorist attacks and an administrative one involved in the promotion and development of social projects (building schools, hospitals). Hamas' dedication towards improving the socio-economic conditions of the Palestinian people reduces the probability of transforming the Palestinian Territories into a rogue state.

In addition, their actions are considerably limited by the presence of secular alternatives— strong nationalist parties that can help preserve equilibrium on the Palestinian political arena, as well as by the control exercised by international actors such as the United States, UN and the European Union. These actors have conditioned the granting of funds for the Palestinian state to the limitation of terrorist activity and protection of human rights.

Another important risk-countering mechanism is the inherent constraint accompanying political activity. In order to preserve a high level of support among the Palestinian people, Hamas must elaborate policies that lead to economic growth, so that it is forced to redirect the majority of its funds to the social and economic sectors (construction of infrastructure, investment stimulation, and industrial development, the creation of functional health and education systems). All these limit the operational capacity of the organization and considerably reduce the resources it can allocate to its military wing and implicitly to its terrorist activity.

TRAM's especially designed for evaluating terrorist risk which raises some problems when attempting to translate this method in another field. The main obstacle can be encountered in the process of defining the concept of "damage" produced as a result of a threat. If in the case of terrorist attacks, their magnitude can be measured with a certain degree of precision (number of victims, value of destroyed goods), the object of this study is much harder to measure (the damage is much harder to quantify).

Additionally the level of uncertainty for this analysis is very elevated, as there is insufficient information concerning the internal mechanisms of terrorist organization and the manner in which the decision-making process takes place.

VI. Conclusions:

The present analytic product can be used both as a starting point for researchers interested in elaborating a methodological framework for the risk analysis of the transition of terrorist organizations to political parties and as a point of comparison for intelligence practitioners interested in testing their own risk analyses on the subject.

Five years have passed from Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections and still it is difficult to assess the impact of this transition on the Palestinian political system. In spite of the implicit domestic conflicts between Hamas, the secular parties and Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority there are no clear proofs that Hamas' leaders intend to take concrete steps towards the materialization of the threats aforementioned.

Nevertheless, in the last years the Palestinian state had to face several threats generated indirectly by Hamas' electoral victory, threats which were derived from the fact that most of the actors on the international arena perceived this political evolution as a proof of the fact that the Palestinian society as a whole embraces the values of Islamic fundamentalism and accepts the efficiency of Islamic terrorism as an instrument of achieving their main political objectives. One of the consequences was that the international community imposed economic sanctions on the Hamas government which had a devastating impact on the Palestinian economy. But the most serious one by far was the 2008 Gaza War between Hamas and Israel, which led to the death of approximately 1400 Palestinian victims (the majority of which were civilians) and the massive destruction of Palestinian infrastructure as a result of Israeli bombings³⁰.

However, we must remember that the validation or invalidation of such a risk analysis can be achieved only after a significant period of time has passed and on the other hand we must keep in mind that there still are many extraneous factors that this study, because of time and space limitations does not include.

³⁰ United Nations, *Human Rights in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories. Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict*, September 15th 2009, p. 106.

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