

The Theology of Hamas

Ed Husain

Wall Street Journal

Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. November 10, 2023: A.15.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-theology-of-hamas-c18e78f0>

Hamas isn't only a terrorist group, and it isn't a Palestinian nationalist movement. It is a religious organization, incubated by the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood, founded in 1928, departed from Islamic tradition and created Islamism, a totalitarian ideology to resist the pluralist West.

Its worldview, as French political scientist Gilles Kepel has documented, arose in the same intellectual firmament as German Nazism and Italian fascism. The Brotherhood developed a new declaration of faith for its members: "God is our objective. The Prophet is our political leader. The Quran is our constitution. Jihad is our method. Martyrdom is our aspiration." No Muslim before the 20th century would have belittled his faith's sacred text by regarding it as a political manifesto.

When Ahmed Yassin left Al-Azhar University in Cairo and founded Hamas in Gaza in 1987, the group's members placed their hands on the Quran and declared: "I promise to be a good Muslim in defending Islam and the lost land of Palestine." Theology is central to Hamas's charter, which declares that "Islam will destroy Israel" and that because "Palestine is an Islamic land," it is the "individual duty of every Muslim" to liberate it. Hamas calls "the land of Palestine" a waqf, an Islamic endowment. These teachings would have been alien to Muslims who coexisted with Jews for 12 centuries.

Hamas envisages a future Palestine that is judenrein, or cleansed of Jews. Article 7 of its charter declares: "The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say, 'O Muslims, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.'" That animus stems in part from its considering the Jews to be European colonialists, ignoring that they're native to the land and that Islamic armies successfully colonized the Levant. Christians, whom Hamas views as part of the local Arab population, are treated less violently, but they don't enjoy unfettered religious liberty.

Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahhar has said that Palestine is only a "toothbrush in our pocket." Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood aspire to create a regionwide Shariah state, a more anti-Western confrontational caliphate in line with Iran's political model than that of moderate Arab nations in the neighborhood.

That intention has led several Arab nations -- Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt -- to ban both groups from organizing within their borders. In 1979 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed a peace agreement with Israel. Two years later Islamists assassinated him.

Hamas's theology justifies its terrorism. "The so-called peace process is futile," Hamas leader Khaled Mashal said in 2015. "There is no peace. Only the path of jihad, sacrifice and blood." Hamas calls its terror faction the al-Qassam Brigades, after the Syrian cleric Izzaddin al-Qassam, who attacked Jews living in kibbutzim in the 1930s. On Oct. 7, the brigade killed more than 1,400 in southern Israel in an orgy of bestial violence. Britain eliminated Izzaddin al-Qassam in 1935, and Israel will kill Hamas fighters today. Yet both are known as criminals and murderers only to the sane and sensible. To Hamas and its flock, the terrorists are known as martyrs and believed to live in heaven.

After Sept. 11, 2001, moderate Muslim leaders declared that terrorists were in hell, not heaven; that they were murderers, not martyrs. Destroying Hamas will require advancing an alternate, more attractive worldview than that. Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, among the highest authorities in global Sunni Islam, has used scriptural arguments against suicide bombings and made religious arguments for including Jews and Christians in Muslim societies. Fluent in French and Arabic, he draws on the writings of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to explain how both were inspired by early Islamic scholars' advocacy for human reason. So long as Muslims enjoy religious-liberty protections, the sheikh intones, they have no need for a caliphate or Islamic state. In this view, civil nation-states are legitimate Islamic governments.

That isn't so far-fetched. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken shuttled across the Mideast last month, he visited the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, a multifaith structure that features a synagogue, mosque, church, all in one complex. The project seeks to embrace Jews as equals -- as our forebears in faith. If after centuries such a model can exist in the U.A.E., it can exist in Jerusalem too.