



SARA ROY

# HAMAS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN GAZA

Engaging the Islamist Social Sector

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## ENGAGING THE ISLAMIST SOCIAL SECTOR

*Sara Roy*

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## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND TRANSLITERATION

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FOR ARABIC TERMS, names, and expressions that appear relatively rarely in everyday English writing, I have applied a standard method for transliteration: the letter ‘ayn is designated by [‘]; the letter hamza is designated by [’]; I omit diacritics.

For Arabic terms that appear in the *Oxford Dictionary* of U.S. English (online edition, 2010), I employ the *Oxford* spelling (e.g., Quran, sharia, Hadith).

For Arabic terms, names, and expressions that appear frequently in English-language academic and journalistic literature, I apply one rendering consistently. For example, an organization known as “The Islamic Center” is rendered as “al-Mujamma al-Islami” (i.e., not al-Mujamma‘ al-Islami). For persons whose names have more than one English-writing format (e.g., al-Gannuchi, al-Gannushi, al-Gannouchi), I apply one common format consistently.

When quoting an outside source, I spell Arabic words as they appear in the source.

## PROLOGUE

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The voices of those from the Middle East . . . [are] telling us that they do not recognize themselves in the image we have formed of them . . . Western scholars look on the world they study as passive or lifeless, incapable of creating a self-image which will compel them to change the image which they have inherited.

—*Albert Hourani*<sup>1</sup>

ON A WARM, sunny day in the spring of 1999, I was touring an Islamic kindergarten in the Gaza Strip with my friend Ramadan, who would sometimes translate for me. After viewing a class in session, we were escorted into the school courtyard, a large, clean space that was serenely, yet surprisingly, silent. As we stood in this empty expanse, a bell rang. Within seconds, scores of children poured into the vast silence, filling it with laughter and play, their joy utterly infectious. The teachers, all women, also laughed at the children's apparent insuppressible excitement.

Our guide, the school director, invited us back inside to continue the conversation. He led us into a room where three men and a woman were sitting at a long rectangular table. "This is our board of directors, and they would like to speak with you." I was surprised and delighted, because I did not expect to have such easy access. With Ramadan translating, I began by thanking them for this unexpected opportunity. The exchange that followed proved to be a critically important experience in my research on Hamas and the Islamic movement.

The conversation turned to the school's operations, curriculum and pedagogy, teachers and their backgrounds, and from there branched out to the local community, the demographic composition of the student body, and family life in Gaza. As we talked, a young woman knocked at the door. She was a student's mother searching for someone, and she abashedly apologized for intruding. Instead of sending her away, one board member, Dr. Ahmad,<sup>2</sup> invited her to enter and join the discussion.

Pointing to me, Dr. Ahmad addressed the young mother and said, "This is *Doctora* Sara from America. She is here to learn about our school and what we teach our children. Would you be willing to answer some of her questions?" In an instant, this young, soft-spoken wisp of

a girl transformed into a self-possessed powerhouse of a woman, and it stunned me.

Although she was speaking before the board, she did not seem at all intimidated. She described the school's many strengths. I then asked her to address its weaknesses. Unhesitatingly, she took my question as an opportunity to voice her concern: "I would like more help with taking care of my children after school; I mean programs after school that would keep them busy in more creative ways, and [provide] more ways for me as a parent to be involved with the school." Concerned that I might have somehow compromised her by my question, I looked at the board members to gauge their reaction. All but one were smiling. They thanked her, and she then excused herself and left with a certain confidence she had not visibly possessed when she entered.

"In America, people think that Palestinians are terrorists and that we are backward, that we prefer the gun to the computer," said Dr. Ahmad. "We as a people have always valued education, like the Jews, and like your people, *Doctora Sara*. You are a Christian?" The question was asked more as a formality that aimed to restate the obvious than as an inquiry. Suddenly, the conundrum I had assiduously and, for the most part, successfully avoided in my research with the Islamic community confronted me without escape: Do I admit I am Jewish and possibly risk my ability to work with that community—or do I lie?

Understandably, most Palestinians assume that the (non-Israeli) foreigners among them are Christian, for what Jew would want to befriend Palestinians or live in Gaza, let alone learn about the Islamic movement? Before the first Palestinian uprising in 1987, one of the first questions I was inevitably asked in Gaza was, are you a Christian? I always told the truth. When people learned I was Jewish, there was concern, curiosity, and some suspicion, but rarely, if ever, hostility. Once I explained why I was in Gaza—to learn about Palestinians and their lives—and gained their trust, which surprisingly did not take very long, my being Jewish became invaluable.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it opened many doors that usually remained shut to outsiders. However, as the occupation grew increasingly repressive, beginning with the first Intifada (or uprising), the question of my religious and ethnic background was *never* again raised, not once. The answer was simply too inconceivable.

Turning to Dr. Ahmad, who had so gently asked the question, I answered, "I am not Christian, I am Jewish." The room instantly fell silent. The board members were clearly surprised, even shocked. Ramadan (who himself was not an Islamist but a member of the main nationalist secular movement, Fatah) turned to me and asked incredulously, "You are *Jewish*?!" Tension rose, and the air in the room became thick and stagnant.



I had imagined this moment many times—how I might respond, how others might respond to me, and what I would do if the situation became difficult or hostile. What followed, however, was altogether unexpected. I began: “I understand why you are surprised. But you should know that within the Jewish community there are many people who oppose Israel’s occupation and who support the right of Palestinians to live in their own state as free people. Many Jews in Israel, in America, and elsewhere speak out against Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank. Jews are not all the same, just as Palestinians and Muslims are not all the same. I am here doing this work not only as a scholar and researcher but as a Jew, as an American, and as a human being. I want to learn more than I have been taught and I am hoping you will help me. That is why I am here.”

After a moment, Dr. Ahmad quietly asked, “What are you hoping to learn and leave here with?”

“Knowledge. And perhaps a deeper understanding of your community, your lives, and what you are trying to achieve.”

“And how will you use what you have learned here?”

“I shall use it to educate others, or at least try.”

“Americans think all Palestinians are terrorists, especially those of us who are religious Muslims. We are not human beings to them, just people who kill Jews. Do you really think you can change that?”

“At a larger level, no, I cannot change that, but at an individual or community level, perhaps I can. What I have always tried to do through my work is give others a different way of understanding this conflict, to challenge the ways of thinking that have been created for us.”

I could feel the tension abating and myself relaxing. The one woman on the board, Um Mohammad, then asked me, “*Doctora Sara*, do you have children?”

“Yes, I have one child, a little girl. Her name is Annie.”

“When you look at your child, what do you feel?” I looked at Um Mohammad and hesitated.

“I feel indescribable love and joy,” I answered.

“Can you imagine that it is different for a Palestinian mother?”

“No, Um Mohammad, I cannot.”

“This is what you must teach others. That we are no different than you.”

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## Chapter 1

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# INTRODUCTION: STRUCTURE, ARGUMENTS, AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

THE ISLAMIC RESISTANCE MOVEMENT or Hamas was established at the beginning of the first Palestinian uprising, which began in December 1987. As the representative of political Islam in Palestine, Hamas has had a long and contentious and, in its own way, remarkable trajectory. Typically, Hamas is misportrayed as an insular, one-dimensional entity dedicated solely to violence and to the destruction of the Jewish state. It has largely, if not entirely, been defined in terms of its terrorist attacks against Israel. Despite the existence of differentiated sectors within Hamas—social (including a nascent economic sphere), political, and military—they are all regarded as parts of the same apparatus of terror.

After September 11, 2001, the U.S. government moved to operationalize this perception when it added Hamas to its list of terrorist organizations on November 2, although President Clinton had already designated Hamas a foreign terrorist entity under Executive Order 12947 on January 23, 1995.<sup>1</sup> A key component of this designation was the belief that Islamic social institutions were an integral part of Hamas's terrorist infrastructure in Palestine. Both the U.S. government and U.S. media perceived the role of these institutions to be largely one of indoctrination and recruitment, as typified by this 1995 description in the *New York Times*: “[I]n the Israeli-occupied West Bank and in Palestinian-controlled Gaza, Hamas has another face. Hamas-run schools offer free classes and Hamas-run clinics charge as little as \$1 for private visits to a doctor. . . . Hamas . . . uses schools . . . to spread the gospel about their jihad, or holy war, and to recruit young suicide bombers with the lure of martyrdom. . . . [C]ritics contend that the distinction between Hamas terror and Hamas good works is dubious. Charity . . . helps raise the political stature of a group that promotes terror.”<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, the view that Islamic social institutions in Palestine are inherently evil has only intensified over time, particularly in the post-9/11 moral and political milieu. This has led the U.S. government to wage a determined campaign against them, freezing the assets of U.S.-based charities that had contributed to Hamas's social organizations. Perhaps the most celebrated case is that of the Holy Land Foundation

for Relief and Development (HLF) based in Richardson, Texas. In 2001, President Bush said, “Money raised by the Holy Land Foundation is used by Hamas to support schools and indoctrinate children to grow up into suicide bombers. Money raised by the Holy Land Foundation is also used by Hamas to recruit suicide bombers and to support their families. . . . Our action today is another step in the war on terrorism.”<sup>3</sup>

In his testimony in the case against the HLF, Matthew Levitt, former deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Treasury, further argued: “the social wing is the foundation for Hamas. It’s what supports its grassroots support. It’s what enables it to have political support. It carries on its back the military wing by providing day jobs, logistical and operational support and perhaps most importantly, financing.”<sup>4</sup> More specifically, “The *zakat* [almsgiving] committees are Hamas’s most effective tool, period. They build grassroot[s] support for the organization. They create a sense of indebtedness among people who benefit from their support. Someone who doesn’t have very much and is able to get over the hump by the assistance of an Hamas charity welcomes the chance to do something back. So if they are asked to do a favor, they are happy to do so. It provides a logistical support mechanism to the terrorist wing. It provides jobs for militants and terrorist alike. It facilitates Hamas’s stature. They are more likely to get your vote if you are getting their financial support.”<sup>5</sup>

On August 7, 2007, the U.S. government blacklisted the al-Salah Islamic Association, one of the largest Islamic charities in the Gaza Strip. Designated a “key support node for Hamas,”<sup>6</sup> al-Salah had its bank accounts frozen, which suggested a new U.S. strategy to target individual Islamic institutions in the occupied territories. In fact, al-Salah was the first “Hamas-related charity” to be added to the U.S. government blacklist since August 2003, when the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) froze the association’s accounts (and “confirmed that al-Salah was a front for Hamas”<sup>7</sup>). The Department of Treasury accused al-Salah of employing “a number of Hamas military wing members.”<sup>8</sup> Since 80 percent of the association’s estimated \$5 million budget came from external donors who relied on the banking system to transfer the funds, the freeze was devastating. By 2007, the association was running schools and medical centers and supporting more than ten thousand children, many of whose families had become impoverished because of the Israeli and international economic blockade of the Gaza Strip.

According to a senior Israeli official, the decision to target al-Salah was political and had originated with the Fatah government of Palestinian prime minister Fayyad, which sought ways to reduce financial support for the Islamic social welfare system<sup>9</sup> (and thereby to reduce the influence of the Hamas party, which had democratically won the Palestinian