Prophets in their own country? Hizb al-Tahrir in the Palestinian context

Jacob Høigilt

Published online: 10 Oct 2014.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

Article views: 1511

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Date: 23 February 2017, At: 07:30

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Prophets in their own country? Hizb al-Tahrir in the Palestinian context

JACOB HØIGILT[*]

Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT   *Hizb al-Tahrir (the Liberation Party, henceforth HT) is a unique kind of islamist organization. Compared with the two major islamist movements – Salafism and the Muslim Brothers – it exhibits certain similarities with each one but is clearly different from both. While most research to date has focused on HT in Europe and Central Asia, this article explores the ideology and function of HT in the West Bank, where it was founded in 1953 and where its leadership comes from today. By analysing Ht in the Palestinian context, it becomes apparent how important ideology is for the party, as the Palestine question has no pride of place even in the Palestinian branch of HT. Instead, it is the global aspiration of re-establishing the islamic caliphate that is of paramount importance. This very focus on ideology has led the party into relative obscurity in the Palestinian Islamist landscape, however. The analysis shows that a full understanding of HT must take into consideration the local contexts in which it operates; and that it is untenable on both ideological and practical grounds to lump different islamist movements together in one shared category.*

Introduction

Hizb al-Tahrir (the Liberation Party, henceforth HT) is in many ways the odd one out among Islamist organizations. It is global in scope and ambition, unlike Muslim Brothers-type organizations, but it is also highly centralized, unlike Salafism, which is a global but very loosely (if at all) structured movement. The rhetoric of HT publications is aggressive, yet the party has never resorted to violent action.[1] Lastly, its main aim is to revive the Islamic caliphate as a kind of pan-Islamic global state, which comes across as a rather eccentric anachronism in an age of nation-states and national Islamist movements in the Muslim world. Still, the party has a following in several parts of the world and has gained attention in countries that are very different from each other, like the United Kingdom (UK), Denmark, Uzbekistan and Malaysia.[2]

---

*Email: jachoi@prio.org

[1]For example, Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, 'Hizb Ut-Tahrir Al-Islami: Evaluating the Threat Posed by a Radical Islamic Group That Remains Nonviolent', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18:2 (2006), pp. 315–334, doi:10.1080/09546550600570168.
[2]For its presence in the United Kingdom, see Houriya Ahmed and Hannah Stuart, *Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy* (London: The Centre for Social Cohesion, 2009), http://www.socialcohesion.co.uk/files/1257159197_1.pdf; for Denmark, see Kirstine Sinclair, *The Caliphate as Homeland: Hizb Ut-Tahrir in Denmark and Britain* (University of

However, the party originated in Jerusalem in the 1950s, and its leaders have continued to be Palestinians. The Middle Eastern context is therefore important in order to understand the party, but this dimension of HT has not been given much consideration in current research. To date, no original research in a European language has been published about HT in the Middle East.[3]

This article fills that gap by analyzing the nature and function of HT in the Islamist and Palestinian (West Bank) contexts. Specifically, I ask: How does HT's ideology and practice compare with other Islamist movements in the Middle East, specifically the Muslim Brothers and Salafism?[4] What is its role in the contemporary Palestinian context? This approach to the party is designed to complement existing treatments, which, with a few exceptions, view HT first and foremost in terms of a globalized threat against Western security on account of its pan-Islamic nature and ideology.

Ideology is undeniably a central part of HT's nature, but at the same time, we can expect the party's function to be partly determined by the local context, as is the case in other countries where it operates.[5] For example, we would expect the social and political function of HT in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) to be different from its position in the UK. Palestine is a Muslim-majority society with established Islamist mass movements, an ethnically homogeneous population, and a history as a colonized country. HT in the UK, by contrast, caters mostly to ethnic minorities in a secular society whose state colonized most of the countries that HT's members have their roots in.[6] However, much of the recent literature about HT treats it as a security threat and part of a wave of international, extremist Islamism, thus leaving out the local contexts and therefore a central factor in understanding the nature and function of HT.[7]

By concentrating on the Palestinian branch of HT the article aims to add nuance and depth to the generalized picture painted by existing research on the party. I sketch out how the party's ideology is manifested in its positions on Palestinian political issues and compare HT's ideology and discourse to those of the existing Islamist movements in

---

Southern Denmark, 2010), http://static.sdu.dk/mediafiles/0/D/1/%7B0D1B4B59-9755-44EB-887E-90595D8D461D%7DKirstine%20Sinclair%20ph%20d%20afhandling.pdf; for Uzbekistan, Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb Ut-Tahrir* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010) is the central reference. For HT in Malaysia, see Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, 'Reviving the Caliphate in Malaysia', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32:7 (2009), pp. 646–663, doi:10.1080/10576100902945527.

[3]This author has been able to find only one article that deals with HT in the Middle East (in Egypt and Turkey): Ihsan Yilmaz, 'The Varied Performance of Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Success in Britain and Uzbekistan and Stalemate in Egypt and Turkey', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 30:4 (2010), pp. 501–517, doi:10.1080/13602004.2010.533448. However, those parts of the article are not based on original research, and in the case of Egypt most attention is in fact given to the Muslim Brothers instead. Some research in Arabic on HT exists, but this author has so far not been able to acquire these studies: N.A., *The Dream of the Caliphate* (Amman: al-Mesbar Studies & Research Centre, 2011); Ali Dhiyab al-'Awar, *The Islamic Liberation Party in Palestine: Its History, Doctrine, and Relationship with the Palestinian Authority* (Self-published, no place given, 2012).

[4]For a good comparison of the latter two movements (in the Jordanian context), see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

[5]For a comparison of its different roles in the Middle Eastern, Central Asian and European contexts, see Yilmaz, 'The Varied Performance of Hizb Ut-Tahrir'; Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia*, pp. 58–73.

[6]For an interesting first-hand account, see Ed Husain, *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw inside and Why I Left* (London: Penguin, 2007).

[7]Zeyno Baran, *Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency* (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, 2004), http://www.cftni.com/Monographs/HizbutahrirIslamsPoliticalInsurgency.pdf; Ahmed and Stuart, *Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*; Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 115–137.

OPT, Hamas and Salafi non-violent and violent groups. By doing so, the article provides an ideological comparison between groups that are too often lumped together as 'Islamist'.

The main part of the source material comprises original HT writings in Arabic and English from the party's website and paper publication *al-Wa'iy* (Consciousness). The Palestinian Center for Media, Research and Development in Hebron[8] kindly provided me with a rich archive of local HT publications dating from the 1980s until today. While consulting older primary sources to check for consistency, the article relies on sources from 2007 to 2012. There are two reasons for restricting the timeframe. First, HT in Palestine and elsewhere produces a large amount of material every month, and a selection has to be made. Second, I chose 2007 as the starting point because this was the year when Hamas and Fatah split, leaving Hamas in control of Gaza and Fatah in control of the West Bank. The assumption was that this event would make it likely that HT commented on both actors quite extensively, which proved to be correct. I also visited the West Bank repeatedly between 2011 and 2013 in connection with two research projects on political activism in Palestine that include HT as an object of research.[9] HT's presence in Gaza is negligible. Even so, I tried to gain access to Gaza, but was denied entry by the Hamas government, and so this study is restricted to the West Bank.

A major difficulty during fieldwork in the West Bank was that Palestinian HT representatives are unwilling to speak with foreign non-Muslims. As far as I know the only non-Muslim foreigners who have been able to interview the party's media spokesman are a researcher from the International Crisis Group and a journalist from *The Economist*, and the apparent reason was that the spokesman wished to complain about ill-treatment by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to an international audience.[10] My own attempts at approaching HT's media representative in Hebron through Palestinian go-betweens were not successful. It is difficult to explain this unwillingness on the part of HT officials, as there seems to be no uniform system of relating to researchers and journalists. For example, Sinclair notes that approaching HT officials in Denmark (her home country) was easy, while it was very difficult in the UK.[11] The fact that I am not a Palestinian may have had something to do with the impossibility of getting access; it may also be that Palestinian HT officials are less interested in talking to non-Muslims than their colleagues in European countries. However that may be, in the end I had to rely on interviews with Palestinian political activists and analysts, Islamist and secular. These interviews produced a mixed picture. Observers with an affiliation to Hamas were likely to dismiss the party as an inconsequential political player. Civil society actors and secular politicians, on the other hand, claimed that HT had a significant presence, but not much political clout. All observers were unequivocally hostile to the organization. A regrettable weakness resulting from the reliance on interviews with observers of HT is that I was unable to get responses from HT officials to criticism directed at the party. The comments from other actors were valuable in order to assess how HT is perceived by other Palestinians actors. However, they are not by themselves trustworthy as statements of HT practices and points of view on current Palestinian affairs. To some extent, the resulting bias is made up for by the copious presence of statements and videos posted by HT officials on their website and YouTube, but it remains a methodological weakness I was unable to completely

---

[8]http://www.ipyl.org/activities/community-media-center.
[9]'Religion, Territory and Violence: Exploring Emerging Religious-Political Groups in Israel and Palestine', funded by the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (ended 2012); 'The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends', funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ongoing).
[10]Personal communication with Andreas Indregard, International Crisis Group analyst, Jerusalem, 29 November 2010.
[11]Sinclair, 'The Caliphate as Homeland', 57–58.

compensate for. In addition to the primary sources, I have harvested news relating to the Palestinian HT from Palestinian news sources in Arabic and English.

Background

Hizb al-Tahrir was established by a Palestinian from Haifa, Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, in Jerusalem in 1953.[12] From the outset, its aim was to liberate the whole Muslim world from what it terms 'colonialist' influence and re-establish the Islamic caliphate. The caliphate is to be governed according to HT's interpretation of Islamic rules and precepts. Today, HT is present in a great number of countries all over the world and is actively seeking to convert Muslims to its cause. Its leadership remains Palestinian, and during the last 10 years, HT has made its presence felt ever more strongly in the West Bank.[13]

Despite its long history as an Islamist movement and its roots in Palestinian society, there is a near complete absence of studies of HT in the OPT. The focus in studies of Islamism during the last 20 years or so has been on the big, political mass movements in the Middle East, such as the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and the Khomeinist movement in Iran, and on militant, violent groups like al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt and al-Qa'ida on a global level.[14] More recently, attention has also been directed to Salafism in various parts of the world, a movement that emphasizes literal interpretations of the Islamic scriptures, avoided engaging in politics until 2011 (with certain exceptions, notably Kuwait), and is characterized by extreme social conservatism and hostility to other Islamic and non-Islamic belief systems.[15]

HT stands out as a unique hybrid between the political Islamist mass movements and the largely a-political Salafi movement. Its explicit, political aims and efforts to mobilize large sections of society are reminiscent of mass movements like the Muslim Brothers. On the other hand, its social conservatism and theological outlook are more akin to Salafism. Consequently, knowledge about it is crucial to understanding Islamism better. This applies especially to the Palestinian context, where HT seems to have grown during the last 10 years at the same time as the dominant Islamist force, Hamas, has been suppressed in the West Bank by the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA).

HT has until recently been dismissed as a political player in Palestinian politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[16] However, during the last few years the organization has not

---

[12]David Commins, "Taqi Al-Din Al-Nabhani And the Islamic Liberation Party," *The Muslim World* 81, no. 3–4 (October 1, 1991): 194–211.

[13]See, for example, Ma'an, 'Hizb Ut-Tahrir Rallies across West Bank', *Ma'an News Agency*, 24 July 2010, http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=301924; Omran al-Risheq, 'Palestinian Hizb Al-Tahrir Flourishes Where Hope Withers', *Arab Reform Bulletin*, July 2008, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=20462.

[14]Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement 1928-1942* (Reading: Ithaca Press, c1998); Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Egypt / Gilles Kepel ; Translated by Jon Rothschild* (London: Al Saqi Books: Distributed by Zed Books, 1985).

[15]Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam?s New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009); Henri Lauzière, 'The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42:3 (2010), pp. 369–389, doi:10.1017/S0020743810000401; Jacob Høigilt and Frida Nome, 'Egyptian Salafism in Revolution', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 25:1 (2014), pp. 33–54, doi:10.1093/jis/ett056; Stéphane Lacroix, *Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism* (Brookings Institution, June 2012), http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/06/07-egyptian-salafism-lacroix; Bjørn Olav Utvik, 'The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait', *Middle East Critique*, 23:1 (2014), pp. 5–27, doi:10.1080/19436149.2014.896597.

[16]Khaled Hroub, 'Salafi Formations in Palestine: The Limits of a de-Palestinised Milieu', in Roel Meijer (ed.) *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), pp. 221–244.

only become more visible in the public sphere; it has also shown that it is able to mobilize thousands of demonstrators. This development started in 2000 and has been particularly visible since the PNA started to dismantle Hamas in the West Bank following the coup in Gaza. In 2007, HT reportedly gathered about 10,000 people in Ramallah in a public commemoration of the fall of the caliphate.[17] While it has traditionally had a power base in the conservative city of Hebron, it also has a presence in many other parts of the West Bank, like Jerusalem (where it has some influence on the *waqf* administration), the Bethlehem area, Qalqiliya, Jenin and Tulkarm.[18]

Along with its rising popularity, HT has also become more controversial. In July 2010, the PA arrested a number of HT supporters going to the organization's annual commemoration of the fall of the caliphate (HT officials claimed that 'thousands' were arrested, but this claim does not correspond well to the PA's practice at other times: at a similar rally in 2013, four persons were detained).[19] The beginning of 2011 was also marked by arrests of scores of HT members and the PA's head of security, emphasizing that HT is an illegal organization in the West Bank.[20]

The History and Ideology of HT: Basic Features

HT identifies itself strictly as an Islamic political party, not a social movement, and its one main aim is to revive the caliphate (abolished by Atatürk in 1924) as a replacement for today's nation-states. This super-state will then ensure that an Islamic way of life is implemented, and it will defend the Muslim nation (*umma*) against its enemies.

HT's ideology has remained stable from the beginning, and a good guide to its ideology and strategy is al-Nabhani's own writings. These show a blend of literalism and modernism in their approach to the Qur'an, Sunna and early Islamic history.

Nabhani cultivated an image of rational, logical argumentation, and stated that the gates of *ijtihad* (personal religious judgement) were open – a distinctly modernist position at the time. He also cultivated a rationalist image, in that he argued that faith in God could be arrived at logically.[21] However, in practice, reason is subordinated to revelation, as is the case in Salafism: Nabhani stated that it is 'forbidden to seek explanations or legal occasions for rules concerning acts of worship, food and drink, clothing and morals'.[22] This blend of literal readings of the holy texts in Islam and a modern religio-political outlook makes for a unique political ideology.

Nabhani wrote a detailed constitution for a future Islamic state in 1953, including everything from the political system to educational and foreign policies.[23] The caliphate as a

---

[17]al-Risheq, 'Palestinian Hizb Al-Tahrir Flourishes Where Hope Withers'.

[18]According to the author's interviews with a secular youth activist in Hebron, 19 March 2013; a Hamas member and journalist in Qalqiliya, Nablus on 24 November 2010; and an Islamist academic in Nablus on 24 November 2010 (names withheld to protect anonymity).

[19]Ma'an news agency, 'Hizb Ut-Tahrir: PA Arrests Thousands', News, *Maannews.net*, 17 July 2010, http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=300222; 'Palestinian Authority Clamps down on Islamists Funded by Gulf States', http://www.worldtribune.com/2013/05/16/palestinian-authority-clamps-down-on-islamists-funded-by-gulf-states/ [Accessed 15 January 2014].

[20]Walid 'Awad, 'Al-Damiri to Al-Quds Al-Arabi: Hizb Al-Tahrir Has Been Officially Informed by the Authorities That It Is Prohibited from Any Activism as Long as It Does Not Work within the Palestinian Pluralist Political System', *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 2 January 2011, http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today%5C02qpt92.htm&arc=data%5C2011%5C01%5C01-02%5C02qpt92.htm (In Arabic).

[21]Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, *The System of Islam* (Hizb al-Tahrir, 2001), pp. 6–7, http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/PDF/AR/ar_books_pdf/Nitham221112.pdf (in Arabic).

[22]Suha Taji-Farouki, *A Fundamental Quest: Hizb Al-Tahrir and the Search for the Islamic Caliphate* (London: Grey Seal Books, 1996), p. 62.

[23]Ibid., p. 64.

detailed system of government is the main feature of HT's ideology and its rehabilitation is its central aim. The political system of the revived caliphate is a blend of modern political practices and models taken from Islamic history and theory; as Emmanuel Karagiannis has shown, the political organization of HT bears a certain resemblance to that of Leninism.[24] Nabhani envisaged a legislating and executive caliph who was to be elected directly by the *umma* from among candidates proposed by an *umma* council, whose members should also be elected. He encouraged the formation of political parties that would engage in debate with the state on behalf of its subjects and call the caliph to account for his actions.[25] As for the notion of democracy, Nabhani rejected it as a Western, non-Islamic concept, and his caliphal state does not grant the subjects much power. His position has been described as reflecting 'a way station between the two distinct camps of Islamic reformism and Islamic radicalism'.[26]

As for the strategy to revive the caliphate, this is also informed both by modern and early Islamic precedents. Al-Nabhani envisioned a vanguard of highly conscious individuals who would form cells in various countries. The members of these cells would educate people about the correct Islamic way of life and system of government. One important strategic device was to alert people to the shortcomings of their government in providing services and welfare, so HT members were encouraged to criticize the policies of their governments continuously and direct attention to how an Islamic government would improve matters. When the ground was prepared, interaction with society would follow, designed to mobilize for change. Once a solid majority of society had been won over to HT's camp, a bloodless revolution would occur and a nucleus caliphate would be established; al-Nabhani eschewed violent activism and advocated an intellectual revolution. In working out this strategy, al-Nabhani claimed to follow the prophet Muhammad's strategy in Mecca and Medina to the letter, citing the prophet's 'strategic' departure from Mecca and consolidation in Medina. At the same time, his strategic approach (but not the ideology!) resembled that of the radical nationalist Ba'th party, which was popular at the time in Syria and Iraq and with which he was well acquainted.[27] al-Nabhani's focus on revolutionary change based on a spiritual transformation closely resembled the secular idea of *al-inqilab* (revolution) in the thought of Michel 'Aflaq.[28] Likewise, the Ba'th party's radical pan-Arabism was echoed in al-Nabhani's pan-Islamism.

In al-Nabhani's view the program to re-establish the caliphate was perfectly realistic, since the Qur'an and the biography of the prophet Muhammad provided concrete recipes of how to go about the task. There was no risk of failure if activists only followed a list of prescribed steps based on Muhammad's example.[29]

HT has shown remarkable consistency with regard to its main aims and way of thinking, as can be illustrated by leafing through any of its recent publications. An issue of HT's magazine *al-Wa'iy*, published in July 2008, is a good illustration.[30] The issue opens with an editorial by the current *amir* (leader) of HT, Ata Abu Rashta, addressed to the rulers of Muslim countries around the world. He urges them to take God's commands seriously and aid HT in its work toward establishing the caliphate anew. Abu Rashta assures the

[24]Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia*, pp. 48–50.
[25]Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*, pp. 68–69.
[26]Ibid., p. 71.
[27]Ibid., pp. 3 and 88.
[28]Nabil M. Kaylani, 'The Rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940–1958: Political Success, Party Failure', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 3:1 (1972), pp. 5–6.
[29]Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, *The Islamic State* (Hizb al-Tahrir, 1998), pp. 235–239, http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/PDF/EN/en_books_pdf/05_The_Islamic_State.pdf; al-Nabhani, *The System of Islam*, p. 59.
[30]Hizb al-Tahrir, *Al-Wa'iy*, 22:258–259 (Hizb al-Tahrir, 2008).

readers that HT's aim is not to assume the reins of power, like some people think, but to revive the Islamic way of life by establishing the caliphate. According to him, this is a completely realistic project, and he lists four reasons why: The Qur'an says it will happen, trusted *hadith* concur, the *umma* is alive and kicking (lit. '*hayya fa'ila*') and lastly HT is the well-prepared agent of this project.

The editorial illustrates clearly HT's pretensions to a global Islamic outreach, as it addresses leaders from countries from Morocco to East Timor. It also displays a characteristic rationalist image and simplistic way of arguing. Abu Rashta systematically lists the supposed irrefutable evidence for his claim that the re-establishment of the caliphate is a realistic project. He then bolsters his case by asserting that the West, always the principal enemy, cannot thwart this project. His evidence for this claim is that Western countries have not been able to control guerrilla movements in Iraq and Afghanistan. This argument quite nonchalantly ignores the significant difference between the project of creating a gigantic, pan-Islamic state and the limited activity of resisting foreign occupation.

As for the tendency to transpose the prophet Muhammad's political strategies and tactics to the present, it is well illustrated by an article about the concept of *nusra* (lit. aid, assistance) in the same issue of *al-Wa'iy*. *Nusra* – which is the term used for the prophet Muhammad's request for help from the Arab tribes to protect the Muslims and propagate of Islam – has acquired a prominent place in HT's strategic thinking. In this article, the author employs the Qur'an and hadith sources to identify not only the best way of seeking help from potential allies, but even the correct timing for doing so (namely, when Muslims lose their protection). According to the author's reasoning, the tribal heads Muhammad sought help from are equivalent to today's heads of state, and at the end, there is a call for *nusra* addressed to the officers and soldiers of 'Muslim armies'.[31] In short, recent publications from HT fit rather seamlessly with al-Nabhani's original ideas.

I turn now to its place on the map of Islamist organizations before I examine in some detail its political function in the current Palestinian context.

HT in the Islamist Landscape

HT is variously described as a 'fundamentalist', 'extremist' organization, being associated with (Jihadi) Salafism and accused of constituting a 'conveyor belt' for Islamic terrorism.[32] In contrast, it is sometimes associated with very different Islamist currents of the Muslim Brothers type.[33] Neither characterization hits the mark, because HT is very much a *sui generis* Islamist organization with its own, distinctive history, ideology and doctrines. In this section I will compare HT's ideology with that of Salafism and the Muslim Brothers to show where they converge and where they part.

At first glance, Hizb al-Tahrir would perhaps seem to be one among many Salafi directions in the modern world. Some of the characteristic traits of Salafism as it is practiced today in many parts of the Muslim world (and Europe) certainly seem to fit the ideology and discourse of HT. It should be noted at the outset that there is more than one definition and genealogy of Salafism in the scholarly literature.[34] In this article I refer to Salafism in a

[31]Ibid., 22:36–51.
[32]Ahmed and Stuart, *Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, pp. 45–46; Baran, *Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency*; Yilmaz, 'The Varied Performance of Hizb Ut-Tahrir'. For a critical survey of previous research, see also Noman Hanif, 'Hizb Ut Tahrir: Islam's Ideological Vanguard', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 39:2 (2012), pp. 201–225, doi:10.1080/13530194.2012.711037.
[33]Husain, *The Islamist*.
[34]For an excellent critical examination of the term Salafi, see Lauzière, 'The Construction of Salafiyya'.

restricted sense, as a distinct and highly visible trend among Islamic movements, or, in Laurent Bonnefoy's formulation, as: 'religious movements that are otherwise labelled "fundamentalist" or "extremist", and whose connection with a project of reform and modernisation is not immediately apparent'.[35] Seen in this way, theology is the main feature of Salafism, and *tawhid*, the doctrine of God's absolute oneness, is the main feature of Salafi theology. Besides this doctrine, there are five specific theological views that are central to Salafism: A return to the authentic practices and beliefs of the first generation of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*); fighting unbelief actively; the belief in the Qur'an and Sunna as the only valid sources of religious authority; ridding Islam of heretical inventions (*bida'*, sing. *bid'a*) like mysticism and saint traditions; and a belief that specific answers to all conceivable questions are found in the Qur'an and Sunna.[36] Salafis eschew *madhhabism* – adherence to one of the four Islamic schools of law – the mainstream system of religious law in Islam which they think has diluted the religion rather than strengthening it. For Salafis, faith must be lived in order to be real, so it is central to perform the religious duties and to emulate the prophet Muhammad and his companions as closely as possible. Their theological approach is simple, systematized, and clearly distinct from that of other Islamist currents, as demonstrated by the summary of the prominent Egyptian Salafi shaykh Mustafa Hilmi: (1) *Shar'*, God's law as stated in the Qur'an and Sunna, is put above *'aql*, rational thought; (2) Salafism accepts no speculative theology – the holy texts are clear and should be interpreted literally; (3) any argument should be proved exclusively by recourse to the Qur'an.[37]

The discourse and ideology of HT agree with many of the abovementioned characteristics of Salafism. HT is concerned with rooting out unbelief and reinstating the one, true Islamic society that worships the one, true God. In going about this, it relies on the prophet Muhammad's words and deeds in a quite literal sense, although transposed to present-day realities. HT publications use much space denouncing the un-Islamic innovations of democracy, and al-Nabhani clearly subjugated reason to revelation (*shar'* over *'aql*).

On the background of such similarities, it is understandable that HT is sometimes identified as a Salafi organization. However, there are quite important differences that make such an association untenable. To begin with, HT and Salafism have different trajectories and antecedents. While HT emerged in the 1950s in a post-colonial context, Salafis trace their theological and activist lineage back to the fourteenth-century jurist Ibn Taymiyya and (at least for Wahhabis) the eighteenth-century Saudi-Arabian preacher Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab.[38] Second, Salafism is not a tight-knit movement by any standards; it is a rather unconnected conglomeration of informal communities all over the world that share a common theological framework and that mutually recognize each other on account of a shared approach to theological thought and religious practice.[39] Salafis

[35]Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen: Transnational and Religious Identity* (London: Hurst, 2011), p. 43. Less restrictively, other scholars include Islamic modernists like Muhammad Abduh and centrist *ulama* like Yusuf al-Qaradawi in their definition. It is unlikely that persons so termed would object, as association with the pious forefathers (al-salaf al-salih) has obvious positive connotations among Muslims. See Roxanne Leslie Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 19–23.
[36]Bernard Haykel, 'On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action' in Roel Meijer (ed.) *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), pp. 38–39.
[37]Mustafa Hilmi, *The Foundations of the Salafi Method in Islamic Thought* (Alexandria: Dar al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun, 2010), pp. 161–181 (in Arabic).
[38]Hilmi, *The Foundations of the Salafi Method in Islamic Thought*.
[39]François Burgat, *L'islamisme à l'heure d'Al-Qaida réislamisation, modernisation, radicalisations* (Paris: la Découverte, 2005), pp. 116–118.

place much emphasis on literal emulation of the prophet Muhammad and his companions, so that they have developed a distinct style of clothing (like ankle-length robes for men and the *niqab* for women) and greetings that set them apart from other Muslims and Islamists. At the same time, in local contexts the space is quite wide for disagreement within these parameters, as shown in post-2011 Egypt, where sharp disagreements erupted between Salafi activists and prominent preachers about the correct Salafi way of engaging with the new political situation.[40] HT, by contrast, is a highly idiosyncratic, tightly organized and politically uniform party that originated in the 1950s and that still adheres to the writings of its founder al-Nabhani. And where Salafism has for the most part shunned politics (until recently in countries like Egypt, Kuwait, and Tunisia), HT was established as a political party having as its main aim the re-establishment of the caliphate, a political goal if ever there was one. Another difference on the ideological level is the view of the Shi'a. In Salafi discourse, the Shi'a are on a par with unbelievers because their reverence for the prophet Muhammad's family, in particular Ali and Husayn, render them idolaters in the Salafi view. Consequently, animosity against the Shi'a and therefore also against revolutionary Iran is strong among Salafis. HT, however, is not so concerned with the doctrinal differences. The Lebanese party branch met with the Iranian ambassador in 2011, and offered him a book written especially for the occasion. Rather than criticizing the Shiite foundations of the Islamic republic, the book criticized the policies of the Iranian government.[41] HT at one point also approached the late Ayatollah Khomeini to ask him to be caliph in a future pan-Islamic state.[42]

Salafi practices are also quite different from those of HT. The mode of activism in HT is restricted to study groups and political agitation in the form of interventions in debates, publication of leaflets and public marches to commemorate the caliphate. Salafi activism is at once less politicized and more varied. Study groups are just one aspect of Salafi activism. The most important part is their social engagement that is directed toward enjoining the good and forbidding the evil by being an example and spreading the Salafi message by way of proselytizing, or *da'wa*. To this end, Salafis involve themselves not only in religious education, but also take part in the social life of their neighbourhoods. They are often involved in welfare work for poor people, and act as brokers and intermediaries in disputes and quarrels.[43] They also carry their identity with them in an unobtrusive manner when conducting business, as a Salafi school owner the author met in the Ramallah area. His school catered mostly to Fatah members and did not spread the Salafi creed. However it had a religious name – Nur al-Huda (the light of guidance) – and the owner's appearance and style of clothing clearly identified him as Salafi. In Egypt, social welfare work is probably one of the main reasons why the Salafi gained almost one-fourth of the votes when it suddenly decided to enter parliamentary politics after the 2011 revolution.[44] The secretive and militant mode of activism favoured by HT does not permit this kind of open social engagement. Instead, HT focuses on indoctrination and, when members have attained a high enough level of knowledge, planned interventions in public spaces such as lectures, seminars and radio call-in programs.

---

[40]Høigilt and Nome, 'Egyptian Salafism in Revolution'.
[41]Hizb al-Tahrir Lebanon, *Hizb Al-Tahrir Lebanon's Book to His Excellency the Iranian Ambassador* (Beirut, 2011), http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/PDF/AR/ar_books_pdf/lb20110820-book-iran.pdf (in Arabic). Karagiannis also notes HT's more relaxed attitude to Shiism: Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia*, 54.
[42]Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia*, 123.
[43]Hroub, 'Salafi Formations in Palestine'.
[44]As stated by activists of the Egyptian Salafi Nur party in an interview with the author, Alexandria, 20 January 2012.

A last point to mention concerns HT in relation to what is often called salafi-jihadism, the violent mode of activism that a minority of Salafi activists has embraced, not least in violent contexts such as Iraq, Syria and the Gaza strip. Apart from the doctrinal differences between HT and Salafism, a notable contrast between jihadism and HT is that the latter is committed to non-violence – until the caliphate is established, of course. As Taji-Farouki notes, al-Nabhani argued that the prophet Muhammad implemented his strategy of proselytizing exclusively through non-violent means, and that consequently, this should also apply to the activism of HT.[45]

In sum, the trajectory, ideology and practice of HT cannot meaningfully be described as Salafism in the way this term has come to denote a specific Islamic ideology and practice today. HT represents a narrower project than Salafism, describing itself as a political party and focusing on a concrete political goal. It is also a tight-knit and secretive organization, while Salafism is a loose trend comprising different views and practices within a general ideological framework. However, it is beyond question that HT draws on much of the same ideational content as Salafism, in terms of a black-and-white picture of what constitutes correct Islamic practices and beliefs and a literal reading of the Qur'an and Sunna.

As for HT's relation to the Muslim Brothers, of which the Palestinian Hamas is a prominent offshoot, there are also conceivable points of convergence. The Muslim Brothers in Egypt and its sister organizations in other Arab countries are explicitly political organizations that work towards islamization of society and the state. Like HT, the Muslim Brothers originated in the twentieth century and is informed by modern political thought.

However, as in the case of Salafism, the differences are more salient than the similarities. First, the Muslim Brothers was from the outset a social movement. Its aim was to recreate an Islamic social order for a modern society by interpreting the religious sources in new and fresh ways. The political project of establishing an Islamic political system was only part of the picture.[46] From the very beginning in 1928, its founder Hasan al-Banna established schools and a scout movement. The Brothers have always been engaged in social welfare, not least in relation to the middle class, and in Egypt the organization has dominated professional syndicates, such as the doctors' syndicate. The political activity of the Muslim Brothers is an important, but far from the only, aspect of the organization's *raison d'être*. This is equally clear in Palestine, where Hamas was founded by members of the Palestinian Muslim Brothers in 1987–1988. The roots of Hamas's popularity and importance in the OPT is the social and welfare activities that its founder Ahmad Yasin built up around the organization *al-Mujamma' al-Islami* in Gaza.[47] The creation and maintenance of a wide-reaching Islamic culture, expressed in football clubs and the Islamic university, is a central part of Hamas,[48] and it is loosely associated with a vast hinterland of Islamic associations and charities.[49]

---

[45]Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*, p. 86.
[46]Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, pp. 235, 246.
[47]Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), pp. 39–45; Sarah Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 160–191.
[48]Michael Irving Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Emanuel Schäublin, *The West Bank Zakat Committees (1977–2009) in the Local Context*, CCDP Working Paper (Geneva: The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2009); Emanuel Schäublin, *Role and Governance of Islamic Charitable Institutions: Zakat-Based Social Welfare (1973–2011) in the Gaza Strip* (Geneva: The Graduate Institute, Forthcoming).
[49]For an excellent account of the relations between Hamas and the Islamist social institutions, see Sara Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Second, unlike HT the Muslim Brothers have never really been pan-Islamic, although there were attempts at creating a strong international coordinating body in the 1980s.[50] They, or organizations that stem from them, are important political forces in a number of Arab countries, like Egypt, Jordan, the OPT, Morocco and Tunisia. The national organizations work within the framework of the modern nation-state and have never challenged this framework. In fact, one may argue that they are nationalist organizations in some respects. This is true for the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, which tries to depict itself as a popular national movement.[51] It is even more true for Hamas, whose struggle for Palestinian liberation is clearly nationalist.[52]

The third and most obvious difference between Muslim Brothers-type organizations and HT is the pragmatism of the former and the rigidity of the latter. The Muslim Brothers never formulated a detailed blueprint for how their ideal society would look, but started by establishing grass-roots activism to improve society's morals and then created their path in a piecemeal fashion as they went along. The establishment of HT followed the opposite trajectory. Al-Nabhani worked out a comprehensive ideology and system of governance, and then set to work mobilizing for this vision to come true. His followers have remained true to his program and never compromised on any issue. In contrast, the Muslim Brothers have been characterized by their pragmatic considerations and resultant ideological changes for decades. Hamas is a salient example. Weighing the possible benefits of political participation in a system it viewed as corrupt against the purity of its ideological Charter issued in 1988, it opted for participation and left the Charter behind, although it has never officially cancelled it.[53] Hamas and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt have both embraced the discourse and (at least to some extent) practice of democracy, having invoked democratic principles when they stood up against oppression from the Mubarak regime or the PA in the case of Hamas.

HT's View on Palestine and the Resistance

Hamas and Salafi groups (of non-violent and violent nature) are visible social and political forces in OPT. Given their ideological and practical differences with HT, it is interesting to see how HT positions itself in relation to them in the Palestinian context, which is to a great extent defined by the struggle against Israeli occupation and the hostility between the various factions on the Palestinian scene.

HT has a well-developed website network, with a central website and websites for some of the local chapters, including the 'province' (*wilaya*) of Palestine. There is no particular attention to Palestine on the central website[54]; for example, during the Pillar of Defence operation in November 2012, when Israel bombarded Gaza for eight days and Hamas answered with rocket attacks, the website featured no stories or comments about it, while all international and regional media covered it intensely. Instead, the most prominent featured articles on the HT website were about Russia, Myanmar, Syria and Uzbekistan.

---

[50]Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition* (London; Saint Paul, MN: Saqi Books, 2010), pp. 96–133.
[51]As is clear from several statements it made during Egypt's political crisis in 2012 and 2013. See, for example, 'Joint Statement of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party – 18 Apr 2012', http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=29906 (accessed 12 June 2014).
[52]Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 41–46.
[53]Paola Caridi, *Hamas: From Resistance to Government?* (Jerusalem: PASSIA, 2010), pp. 99–100.
[54]The website is found at http://www.hizbuttahrir.org/.

Naturally, there is more attention given to Palestinian affairs on the website of the Palestinian chapter of HT, but even here, Palestine does not seem to be an important issue in itself. During Operation Pillar of Defence, several articles and comments were published on the website, but in general, news stories about Palestine appear only to the extent that they are directly related to HT activities or the big issue of the caliphate. There is no news about Israel's occupation policies or HT activism against occupation, and this seems to reflect the situation on the ground: HT does not organize or partake in demonstrations against the occupation or settlements. To the extent that local news is covered on the website, it is typically when HT members have made some intervention in a debate, as when a member of the student organization (The consciousness bloc) at Birzeit University tried to convince a seminar on media in the Arab Spring that the main aim of the popular protests in a number of Arab countries was to revive the caliphate.[55]

This is not to say that Palestine is trivial to HT. After all, al-Nabhani devoted a book to the issue in 1950, entitled *Saving Palestine*.[56] Interestingly, his vision for saving Palestine three years before he founded HT was by and large cast in secular, pan-Arab terms: the expressions 'the Arab nation' (al-umma al-'arabiyya) and the Arab people (al-sha'b al-'arabi) figure prominently, while the notions of an Islamic nation and caliphate are less visible. But in keeping with the doctrine for HT which he later laid out, the strategy for saving Palestine in this book is very much a collective, long-term project seen in absolute terms. Palestine is one of many chapters in the Western history of imperialism, so the British are an enemy just as much as the Zionists; and there can be no partial liberation – the Jewish state must disappear altogether. In its later, Islamist formulation of the issue of Palestine, HT treats Palestine as a part of the larger picture of a war of civilizations between the West and Islam. In this picture Palestine is neither more nor less than a province in a future Islamic caliphate. It is of obvious symbolic importance, as the al-Aqsa mosque is considered to be Islam's third holiest site, but in practical terms it does not play any major role. In his strategic blueprint *al-Takattul al-Hizbi* (party formation) al-Nabhani did not even mention Palestine, but argued simply that the work for an Islamic state must start from the Arab Islamic world.[57]

Palestinian HT members stay true to this conception. During 2012, the director of HT's media office in Palestine, Mahir al-Ja'bari, published a series of 16 articles about the Palestine question in which he seeks to explain what has happened over the last 100 years and why. They were followed by two articles entitled 'The Plan for two Palestinian Authorities', treating the split between Hamas and Fatah from 2007. These articles provide an informative glimpse of HT's ideological rhetoric on the issue of Palestine and its positioning relative to other Palestinian actors.

In the introduction to the series, al-Ja'bari provides an instructive comment about the nature of the Palestinian issue as he views it. According to him, the series is intended to

> contribute to reformulate [the issue of Palestine] in the Islamic nation's (umma) consciousness in terms of being a military issue with political aspects. It is the issue of the Islamic nation, not of a people or a group of factions that have acted within

---

[55]'The Consciousness Bloc at Bir Zayt University Challenges the Attempts to Distort the Revolutions', *Media Office of Hizb Al-Tahrir - Palestine*, 2 November 2012, http://www.pal-tahrir.info/events111/5065-كتلة-الوعي-في-جامعة-بيرزيت-تتصدى-لمحاولة-تشويه-الثورات.html (in Arabic).
[56]Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, *Saving Palestine*, ed. Feras Salah Obeid (Unofficial copy published online on Scribd.com, 2011), http://www.scribd.com/doc/انقاذ-فلسطين (in Arabic).
[57]Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, *Party Structure* (Hizb al-Tahrir, 1953), p. 7, http://arabic.hizbuttahrir.org/ (in Arabic).

the sphere of the Arab regimes and the arenas of international relations, thereby distorting the fundamental concepts of this issue.[58]

Three positions can be deduced from this introduction to the article series. First, HT rejects the notion of Palestinian nationalism. In its view, the issue is not about a people, but about the Islamic nation. This places Palestine squarely within the struggle to revive the caliphate as a super-state for a revived and politically united *umma*. With this formulation, HT distances itself not only from the Palestinian national movement represented by the PLO, but also from the main Palestinian Islamist organization Hamas. Hamas regards itself and is viewed by others as an Islamist *and* nationalist liberation organization for which an Islamic state in Palestine is the ultimate aim, while for HT Palestine is just one of several Islamic provinces (*wilayat*) that should be liberated from non-Islamic domination. Second, and following from the first point, there is no room for different organizations, or factions, in the struggle to liberate Palestine. There should be only one, united force to direct the struggle, and that force is the revived caliphate. Third, by explicitly stating that the issue of Palestine is a military one, HT signals that it views the conflict as a zero-sum game. There is no room for negotiations; Israel must be defeated by force and obliterated as a state.

With this introduction, al-Ja'bari assumes a highly idealist position, and his chronology of the Palestine issue from the beginning of the twentieth century until today is a curious mix of idealist, unrealistic principles and a political analysis informed by political realism. Al-Ja'bari treats the resistance and the international plots surrounding Palestine with cynicism, showing how self-interest on the part of the various actors led to the dismal situation of today. At the same time, however, his articles betray a belief in simple and absolute political categories. The different players (Israel, the Arab regimes, the US, the UK, 'Europe') act according to long-standing, unchanging and grand strategic schemes. For example, according to al-Ja'bari the UK has since the 1930s worked toward making Israel a pluralist state that could act as a bridgehead for British interests in the Middle East. Similarly, the reworking of the Palestinian national curriculum in the late 1990s (a comprehensive process that came about because the Palestinians wanted their own curriculum instead of the Egyptian/Jordanian one they had inherited) is interpreted as merely a step in the grand scheme of naturalization (*tatbi'*) with Israel and the relinquishment of the liberation struggle – in a word, as part of the betrayal of the Arab-Islamic struggle against Israel.[59]

In al-Ja'bari's world there is no room for pragmatic change and accommodation, or for ad hoc solutions to complex and acute problems that may suddenly emerge in international diplomacy. Everything is well-ordered and planned, and the world is painted in black and white.

This attitude also informs his position toward Fatah and Hamas, the main political actors on the Palestinian scene. In the two articles entitled 'The Plan for Two Palestinian Authorities' he condemns Fatah and criticizes Hamas.[60] His condemnation of Fatah of course

---

[58]Mahir al-Ja'bari, 'The Issue of Palestine, Part 1: Palestine Is a Pre-historic Land, and Its Geography before Sykes-Picot', 2 January 2012, http://www.pal-tahrir.info/articles1/8-مقالات/4106-قضية-فلسطين-1-فلسطين-أرض-قبل-التاريخ-وجغرافيا-قبل-سايكس-بيكو .html (in Arabic).

[59]Mahir al-Ja'bari, 'The Palestine Question: The Outbreak of the Security Scheme and the Onset of the March towards Naturalization' (article distributed by HT-affiliated email lists on 21 May 2012).

[60]Mahir al-Ja'bari, 'The Plan for Two Palestinian Authorities, Part 1: The Entrance of New Players', المكت مقالات/ 5074-مشروع-السلطتين-الفلسطينيتين-1-دخول-اللاعبون الجدد 2 November 2012, http://www.pal-tahrir.info/articles1/8- .html; Mahir al-Ja'bari, 'The Plan for Two Palestinian Authorities, Part 2: Blood Ties and Political Fissure', 5 November 2012, http://www.pal-tahrir.info/articles1/8-مقالات/5088-مشروع-السلطتين-الفلسطينيتين-2-الالتحام الدموي-والانشطار-السلطوي .html.

comes as no surprise: Not only is Fatah a secular nationalist organization, but under Arafat and Abbas it has changed its policy from fighting occupation with arms and refusing to acknowledge Israel to ending the resistance struggle, accepting a statelet and uneven negotiations and cooperating with Israel on security matters. Al-Ja'bari refers to Mahmoud Abbas as the 'Karzai of Palestine', implying that he has traded the interests of his people for his own well-being and prestige.

The criticism of Hamas is interesting because it is clear that HT is sympathetic to at least parts of Hamas's program and policies. Al-Ja'bari commends the military wing of Hamas, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades, for their self-sacrifice and eagerness to die as martyrs, and he repeatedly and approvingly mentions Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi, the Hamas leader who opposed participation in Palestinian elections in 1996 and was assassinated by Israel in 2004. However, he sharply criticizes Hamas's decision to participate in elections in 2006, which he considers an ideological sell-out in the interests of short-term political gains. As with all other issues, this one is also part of a big scheme: The West wanted Hamas to participate in order to draw Islam into the dirty game of politics, with the wider aim of winning the war of ideas between Islam and the West. He acidly comments on Hamas's ascension to power after 2006, saying that it 'enabled America to continue its efforts to implicate Islamic symbols in its dirty plan [of dominating the region] through the game of democracy'.[61] In a YouTube video posted in 2012 al-Ja'bari extends his criticism of Hamas, arguing that they have no real plan for liberating Palestine. In fact, Hamas and Fatah are in a sense in cahoots with each other: Both want self-rule in which they dominate. Al-Ja'bari advises Hamas not to negotiate with Mahmoud Abbas at all, as he is a person who 'held secret negotiations with the Jews since the 1970s'. He further cites the radical Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb to the effect that Islam and jahiliyya are two currents that will never meet, using this quote as an argument for the futility of participating in elections, like Hamas has chosen to do.[62]

The animosity is mutual. Hamas members are not at all sympathetic to HT and its positions. One Hamas PLC member criticizes HT for having a narrow and weak ideology, and states that it is popular only among people who are lacking in resistance spirit. He does not view HT as a threat to Hamas, but rather as an annoying political presence.[63]

As for Salafism, HT dismisses it as a liberating force. Salafism has for the most part been politically quietist – it is only recently that this trend entered party politics. Salafis have been content to work within the framework of existing Middle Eastern states and in HT's eyes they are therefore part of the un-Islamic systems they should work to overthrow. Specifically, HT criticizes harshly the Salafi prioritization of stability over potential political chaos and religious strife (*fitna*).[64] When Salafi organizations have entered politics in order to influence the political system, HT has appeared distinctly unimpressed. Shortly after the electoral victory of the Egyptian Salafi party Hizb al-Nur after the 2011 revolution, for example, HT issued a statement where they sharply criticized Egypt's Salafis. According to HT, the Salafis ignored their own principles by participating in a democratic system, and they committed the unacceptable error of meeting with American diplomats. Referring to the classic Salafi principle of *al-wala wa-l-bara* (the obligation to express love for God and enmity against falsehood) HT asks sarcastically: 'Where has the doctrine of *al-wala wa-l-bara* gone, for whose sake the Salafi current has always fought its

[61]al-Ja'bari, 'The Plan for Two Palestinian Authorities, Part 1'.
[62]*Mahir Al-Ja'bari: The Liberation of Palestine Does Not Come through the Government of the [Palestinian] Authority*, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgbKmBJnf_g&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
[63]Author's interview with Hamas PLC member Muhammad Totah, Jerusalem, 25 November 2010.
[64]Hizb al-Tahrir, *Al-Wa'iy*, 22:113–114.

opponents?'[65] HT publications also clearly distance the party from jihadi Salafis, on account of HT's principled non-violent stance.[66]

HT's Influence in Palestine

HT's self-imposed ideological rigidity and its relentless criticism of everybody who does not share its views have made it an isolated political and religious actor in the Palestinian context. In the absence of any likely allies, the question is whether HT by itself is able to influence Palestinian society and politics.

The answer seems to be a qualified 'no'. Politically, there is little awareness of HT among ordinary Palestinians, and very few support the party. When asking about it, this author often experienced that Palestinian political activists were puzzled that anyone should have an interest in an organization they regarded as an irrelevant and eccentric one in the Palestinian context. In a nationwide poll carried out by the research organization Fafo in 2011, only 2 per cent of the 1545 respondents regarded HT as the most representative Islamist political party for the current Islamic situation in Palestine. The corresponding figures for Hamas and Islamic Jihad were 27 and 8 per cent, respectively (interestingly, 60 per cent did not regard any of the Islamic organizations in Palestine as representative of the Islamic situation!).[67] Socially speaking, HT may have some influence in the sense that it supports conservative values and seeks to halt the work of youth and cultural organizations that engage in 'liberal' practices such as music education and mixed-gender workshops. This certainly seems to be the case in Hebron, where the organization has its stronghold, but it is unclear whether it exerts any noticeable influence on the social scene in other Palestinian towns and cities.

It certainly claims that it does so. HT Palestine has published numerous videos of its activities, and issues a press statement every time some of its adherents have done anything in public. In June 2012, for example, on the occasion of the 91st anniversary of the abolishment of the caliphate, the party published a YouTube video of its members in Gaza visiting shops and public places to convince people about their cause. These occasions are reminiscent of the activism of Jehova's Witnesses and Mormon missionaries in Europe and the Unites States: HT members visit shops in pairs, wearing white caps with the party's logo, and one member talks while the other listens and supports him.[68] Even from HT's own video, the activists do not seem to meet with much success.

At the same time, it remains a fact that HT has been able to gather sizeable numbers of people in the West Bank for commemorations of the abolishment of the caliphate. In the absence of evidence that HT has any real influence on Palestinian politics, this fact perhaps suggests that the nature of HT in the Palestinian context is *parasitic*: It thrives on people's dissatisfaction with the existing political alternatives. The big turnout for its marches has come after the split between Fatah and Hamas in 2007, a split that was devastating for

---

[65]'News and Comment: The New Islamists – Are They Really New Secularists?!' *Media Office of Hizb Al-Tahrir – Palestine*, 10 February 2012, http://www.pal-tahrir.info/hizb-world//4156-؟-جدد-علمانيون-هم-هل-الجدد-الإسلاميون-وتعليق-خبر.html.
[66]Rida Belhaj: Dr. al-Marzuqi Was Wrong When Speaking About the Sharia in a Provocative Way and in Mixing Between Hizb al-Tahrir and the Salafi Current', *Media Office of Hizb al-Tahrir – Palestine*, 2 March 2012, http://www.pal-tahrir.info/hizb-world/4233--و-التحرير-حزب-بين-بخطه-و-مستفزة-بطريقة-الشريعة-عن-بحديثه-أخطأ-المرزوقي-الدكتور-بلحاج-رضا السلفي-التيار.html.
[67]Jing Liu, Åge A. Tiltnes, and Jon Pedersen, *Surveying Palestinian Opinion. Results from an Opinion Poll in the West Bank and Gaza Strip February 2011* (Oslo: Fafo, 2011), p. 125, http://www.fafo.no/ais/middeast/opt/opinionpolls/palestinian_opinions_2011/10131.pdf.
[68]*Hizb Al-Tahrir's Youth Visit Gaza's Markets to Remind People about the Caliphate*, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KqQ92DtPkE&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

the Palestinian national struggle and is very unpopular among ordinary Palestinians. In this context, by doing something else, and something which provides an alternative to the courses of both Fatah and Hamas, HT can gather support for its marches as a form of protest against the existing establishment. This hypothesis would resolve the tension between the low level of support in the 2011 poll cited above and local Palestinian news reports that talk about thousands of people participating in HT rallies: Such rallies provide an opportunity for people to voice their dissatisfaction with the Palestinian authorities, without necessarily subscribing to HT ideology.

However, the uncompromising alternative discourse of HT has never translated into political action on the ground, other than these commemorative marches. The combination of its lack of any social welfare activism, absence of political initiatives and rigid ideological scheme is a likely reason that HT has not grown into a political player to be reckoned with in the Palestinian context. And in contrast to its role in secularized or Muslim-minority countries like the UK, Denmark and Uzbekistan, in Palestine it is only one among several Islamist actors and cannot tempt young people simply by offering them a way to realize their Muslim identity.

This survey of HT's influence and function in the Palestinian context provides a corrective to much recent research on HT which associates it with al-Qa'ida, to which it is accused of providing a 'conveyor belt' of violent Islamic extremists. The idea here is that young HT activists will eventually turn to violent Islamic activism, which purportedly shares the basic ideational framework with HT. If this were true one would expect to see young Palestinian HT activists turn to the jihadi Salafi groups or Hamas's armed wing al-Qassam's brigades; there is no lack of violent Islamist organizations in the Palestinian context. Hard facts about such mobility are naturally very hard to obtain and verify, but based on the available indicators, no 'conveyor belt' effect seems to exist in the Palestinian context. The Palestinian Salafi jihadi groups have grown up in the Gaza strip, where HT has only a negligible presence. The West Bank, where HT is much more visible, has not seen the rise of such extremist groups. Furthermore, HT is criticized and to some extent despised by other West Bank activists, religious as well as secular, exactly because it discourages any resistance activity. It may be argued that individuals within HT get disillusioned by the party's lack of direct political activism and therefore turn to radical groups that act on their radical program, but that reasoning begs the question of why those individuals would have joined HT in the first place. Its eschewal of direct activism is well known, and its indoctrination process is thorough. The research presented here therefore supports Karagianni's more cautious position that it is HT's principled and ideological stance on violence that has kept it from turning violent.[69] Waiting for a legitimate authority to declare *jihad*, it has eschewed the use of violence for 55 years and there is no indication it will change its policy either in Palestine or elsewhere.

Conclusion

The analysis of HT in the Palestinian context clearly shows that the party must be distinguished analytically from other Islamist currents. It also shows that the combination of HT's rigid ideology and the Muslim-majority context of Palestine leads to the marginalization of the party as a political actor. As argued by previous studies, ideology is of overriding importance for the rhetoric and practices of the party. The current discourse of HT in Palestine follows the lines laid down by its founder Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani to the letter.

---

[69]Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia*, 118.

The Palestinian context, marked by almost daily clashes between protesters and the occupying Israeli army in the West Bank, and a militant Hamas government in Gaza committed to armed resistance, seemingly makes no impression on HT cadres. They refuse to get involved in the resistance, preferring instead to wait for a caliphate army to liberate the whole of Palestine sometime in the future. The only activities they engage in are commemorations of the caliphate's dissolution and disruptions of political meetings they deem to be harmful to the interests of the Islamic nation.

The strong focus on ideology and discursive coherence is a double-edged sword as far as social and political influence is concerned. It enables HT officials to take the moral high ground by saying that they have never reneged on their positions. On the other hand, it has hindered HT's acceptance as a viable political force among ordinary Palestinians. In a society where both the Muslim Brothers trend of Islamism (in the form of Hamas) and Salafi currents are well established, HT's highly idealistic program and discourse have been less than successful. Hamas is active in both resistance and social work, and Salafis engage in proselytization and social work. Both currents engage actively with the society around them and its concerns, while HT disregards the day-to-day political and social realities, focusing on a distant and unrealistic future goal. This has to some extent proven to be a successful strategy in countries where young people are searching for their roots and a religious identity, like the UK, where Muslims are a minority, or in secularized states such as the Central Asian ones. However, in the Islamic heartlands of the Middle East it has so far failed.

In terms of the scholarly and media debates on Islamism, the Palestinian HT provides an example of how important it is to qualify the term 'Islamism'. HT's disagreements with both the Muslim Brothers-affiliated Hamas and the Salafi trend are not only about strategy or trivial details. They are fundamentally at odds with each other in terms of how to read the religious texts, how to interact with society and what the end goal of any Islamist movement should be. They share little except the claim to represent an authentic version of Islam and the vision of reforming society so that it becomes more 'Islamic'.