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Palestine: Hizb al-Tahrir Flourishes where Hope Withers

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The failure of the Palestinian national movement and its shaken credibility in the public eye are giving strength to religious movements, which are expanding to fill a widening gap. But the movements that are gaining are not Hamas or Islamic Jihad, which gained their legitimacy more or less as other Palestinian movements did: by taking part in the liberation struggle while upholding the aspiration to establish an independent national state. Rather, there are now other Islamist parties and groups that deny the national project and are hostile toward democratic and social freedoms.

Perhaps the most influential of these movements, and the one with the clearest political platform, is the *Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami* (the Islamic Liberation Party), which was founded in Jerusalem in 1953 by the Islamic judge Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani. Hizb al-Tahrir made the idea of resurrecting the caliphate a permanent watchword of its political activity and a religious duty, in addition to being a panacea for the political, economic, and social problems of the world's Muslims. According to its beliefs, the caliphate will not be founded through popular revolution, but rather through a military coup in a Muslim country. The caliph will then proceed to conquer the world, including liberating Palestine from the Jews. It is worth noting that this theory largely replicates the Marxist-Leninist vision of revolution as led by a vanguard adopting its ideas as a way to take power.

As with other Salafi movements, Hizb al-Tahrir sees a return to fundamentals and “righteous ancestors” as the way to overcome the bitter present and build a prosperous future. Various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood have in one way or another absorbed such modern ideas as democracy and human rights, which could no longer be ignored after Brothers became active in civil society, professional organizations, and universities as well as entering into the political arena in elections and parliaments. Hizb al-Tahrir, however, openly rejects these concepts, describing them as undisguised apostasy and a Western conspiracy to tighten control over Muslims.

Until recently, Hizb al-Tahrir had not earned Palestinians' trust. It is a party of rhetoric, whose political activity has been limited to giving sermons and issuing calls to resurrect the caliphate while other Palestinian factions were making sacrifices to end the occupation. But now—with the Palestinian national movement having exhausted the options of negotiation and of resistance with

making significant accomplishments on the ground and with a new balance of power favoring Israel, which is uninterested in peace-- it has become possible for Hizb al-Tahrir to claim that its approach was right.

The party's progress over the past two years clearly indicates its burgeoning influence. Benefiting from the faltering of Hamas's experiment in power, in August 2007 Hizb al-Tahrir gathered some 10,000 supporters in a festival in Ramallah commemorating the fall of the caliphate. Hizb al-Tahrir has also been helped by Palestinians' dwindling hopes over negotiations, and held angry marches in most Palestinian cities in November 2007 under the slogan "Palestine Will be Freed by the March of Armies, not the March of Negotiations," protesting against the Annapolis peace conference.

Hizb al-Tahrir's base also has become more socially diverse. Once restricted to the traditional merchant class largely originating from Hebron (the most conservative Palestinian area) or those who had migrated to Jerusalem in search of new markets, the party has begun asserting itself among other classes. Now one can see thousands of the poor and farmers, many of them young, bringing along their wives wearing the head coverings or face veils and their children in segregated buses going to party rallies, where wealthy patrons cover the cost of food, drink, and transportation.

Although Hizb al-Tahrir takes a non-confrontational stance towards Israel (and to a lesser degree towards local society, particularly the more vulnerable groups such as women), one cannot ignore the fact that its popularity reflects anger and frustration that might one day explode into violence. Hizb al-Tahrir shares with extremist Islamist organizations the same hard-line points of reference derived from the writings of Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi (as interpreted by the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb), which divide the world into a "House of Islam" and a "House of Apostasy" —war being the only language of dialogue between them.

Unfortunately, the Palestinian cause would be the first victim of this explosion, which explains why Israel turns a blind eye to Hizb al-Tahrir's activities. In addition to its disavowal of the principle of a Palestinian state, Hizb al-Tahrir's rhetoric, if it prevailed over that of the nationalist movement, would recast the Palestinian cause as a religious conflict. Furthermore, the party's growing popularity is a grave danger to the progressive ideas and structures that Palestinians have worked hard to consolidate, as well as to decades of effort to convince the international community of the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause.

Hizb al-Tahrir offers a straw to a drowning man. But the disasters through which Palestinians have passed require a new sense of seriousness from them, before the occupation and desperate Palestinians themselves uproot what remains of the dream of independence and democracy.

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