

CREATING CIVIC COMMUNITIES

Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector, by Sara Roy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. xvii + 236 pages. Notes to p. 287. Bibliography to p. 307. Index to p. 319. \$35.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Nubar Hovsepian

Sara Roy's new book on the relationship between the social and political spheres in Gaza is meticulously researched and clearly written. As always, Roy manages to give voice and agency to Palestinians individually and collectively. Roy combines scholarly rigor and moral clarity to examine and challenge "the conventional frame that defines Hamas only as a terrorist organization" (p. 4). She avoids simple binaries of religious versus secular. Instead, she identifies the role of Islamic-inspired organizations in creating civic space that promotes civism to cement and consolidate society, economy, and polity. But she quickly warns that the Islamist movement in Gaza is not homogeneous, but rather highly variegated. The social institutions in Gaza did not so much seek to widen their religious congregations as to create "civic communities" through incremental reform couched in a cultural and universal

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discourse that is not limited by religious terms (p. 15).

I think it would be fair to claim that since the Nakba, Palestinian social institutions have developed precisely because of the absence of a central state authority. Most Palestinian political organizations, from the late 1960s, set up social institutions (e.g., hospitals, clinics, schools, and kindergartens) to serve people's needs. This form of activism also aimed to secure the political support of the popular masses. Through detailed case studies, Roy seeks to provide a rich ethnographic and sociological profile of those who are involved with Islamist social institutions, be they providers or recipients (p. 17). Indeed, social organizations could be identified as Fatah or Hamas inspired. However, their presence at the civic level suggests that their success depends on professionalism, clarity, and a strong grass-roots anchor. Hamas built on already existing Islamic institutions and with its allies managed to change the orientation of these social initiatives from mere proselytism to "one that increasingly became more broad-based and development-oriented" (p. 70). Through its civic engagement, Hamas learned the value of "limited" pluralism and political accommodation.

Roy claims that two historical conjunctures are critical in explaining Hamas's work in the political and social sectors. During the first intifada, Hamas sought greater political visibility by "extolling sacrifice and martyrdom," which rendered the social sector secondary. But in the Oslo period, Roy astutely shows that the "social sector came to define the political with an emphasis on moderation, community development, and innovation" (p. 94).

Roy provides us with what she calls a "descriptive context" (chap. 5). Islamic social institutions (ISIs) are engaged in a plethora of fields, including education, health, and sports, as well as youth sectors. In contrast to this approach, Roy offers a useful and succinct typology: traditional/nonactivist and developmental/activist. Although the distinctions between these categories could be fuzzy at times, the former tends to engage in charity and caters to individual needs, whereas the latter favors

civic empowerment predicated on community participation. What is the relationship of Hamas to the various ISIs? On the financial front, Hamas secures financial support from varied sources, including Gulf states (Qatar), Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood International, and to a lesser extent Hizballah. It also secures support from various NGOs in the United States, Europe, and other places. In contrast, each ISI was responsible for its own funding. Essentially Hamas did not "possess the bureaucratic capacity to centralize, manage, and finance the entire social sector" (p. 141).

Roy also investigates Islamic economic entities (IEEs). Without exception, this sector is motivated by profit. The actual work site might enforce more social exclusions and separations (men and women), and prayer by workers might be expected, at least as public performance. Roy suggests that the end result was not the creation of an Islamic economy, but "increased leverage with an increasingly adverse economic environment" (p. 150). Economic and financial calculations explain IEE practices, rather than political or ideological imperatives.

Roy concludes that ISIs had a direct moderating impact on Hamas and the Islamic political environment. In the post-Oslo period they did not challenge the state (the PA), but rather often worked closely with it. ISI cadres were mostly professional and not outright ideologues. During the Oslo period Hamas sought accommodation and coexistence, and the social sector was a "de-radicalizing and even universalizing force within the movement" (p. 163).

Indeed Hamas won the 2006 elections, but only after armed clashes with Fatah in June 2007 Hamas took full political control of Gaza. Both Hamas and Fatah seemed to be fighting to control the Palestinian Authority, which in fact has little authority. Under Hamas, Gaza has witnessed greater Islamization, in part to contain the rising Salafi challenge to its political hegemony. The struggle against occupation was increasingly militarized by both Fatah and Hamas. Lastly, Hamas failed to transform the objectives of political Islam into a national goal. As Roy points out, "Hamas' fundamental

impulse is political and nationalist, not religious" (p. 165).

A short review fails to capture the rich details that undergird Roy's analysis. Suffice it to say that Roy has written the most nuanced and compelling work on Hamas and the informal sector in Gaza.