Jacob Høigilt

Raising Extremists?

Islamism and education in the Palestinian Territories

Fafo

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Abstract

Islamic private schools are part of the national fabric of Palestinian society and represent a grass-roots movement that is not about assuming power over the state or recruiting 'Islamic militants'. Instead, their function is to assert the role of Islam in contributing to Palestinian national development, a function that may or may not be politicised but is neither dramatic nor sinister. In fact, they may be seen as important contributions to building a viable civil society in Palestine. However, the struggle between Fatah and Hamas for political power, as along with international counterterrorism measures, has seriously affected a number of Islamic charities and the schools they run. The result is economic problems and a weakening of these institutions in Palestinian society. Based on empirical study of local Islamic private schools in the West Bank and Gaza, this report analyses their activities and relation to Islamism. This fills a gap in literature about Islamic movements, where education is often mentioned, but seldom taken seriously or studied in detail.

Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction: Education and the Islamic movement

What is the function and importance of Islamic private schools in the Palestinian Territories? This is a contested question with strong political overtones, and the main problem for the present report. As part of Islamic charity organisations, Islamic schools are often considered integral parts of Hamas. They have faced considerable political and economic challenges during the past few years, as Islamic charities have been targeted by both the Palestinian Authority and the international community because of their suspected association with terrorism. However, the link between the schools and violent political activism has been postulated rather than documented, and little attention has been directed to the activity of Islamic schools. There is reason to ask whether, and to what extent, the Islamic private schools are integral parts of Hamas and the 'terrorist infrastructure' in the Palestinian Territories.

At the same time, there is general agreement that Islamic private schools in the Muslim world are part of an 'Islamic Trend', or Islamism in a wide sense. Scholars in the Middle East and North Africa have increasingly realised that the term Islamism covers a wide range of different movements and organisations, and that their strictly political role is but one aspect of their significance. Education is an activity that is often mentioned in research about Islamism but seldom analysed in depth. As early as 1969, Richard Mitchell noted the central importance of schooling for the Muslim Brothers in his classic account of the organisation (Mitchell 1993). However, despite the fact that Islamic organisations run kindergartens and primary and secondary schools in a number of Arab countries, little research has been devoted to this grass-roots activity. That is something of a paradox, because Islamic organisations are considered to be self-conscious bearers of a particular religious, political and social ideology, and education is one of the most important arenas in which to teach and spread ideology. This report seeks to resolve that paradox by taking Islamic schools seriously as central parts of the Islamic movement.

The following discussion has three aims. The first is simply to provide a description of Islamic private schools in the Palestinian areas. What is their extent and nature, and what social function do they have in Palestinian society? The second aim is to understand the role of the Islamic schools in the general Palestinian system of primary and secondary education, where schools are divided into three types: government (the

large majority), UNRWA, and private schools. Thirdly, the report investigates the role of education in the Islamic movement generally and for Hamas specifically by comparing the nature of schools and their activities to Hamas's ideology and research on Islamism in general. These three questions are used to investigate the widespread assumption that Islamic charities are sources of militant religio-political indoctrination and recruitment for violent Islamist activity.

These aims situate the report at the intersection between two fields of research: studies of Islamism and studies on Islam and education in the Arab and Islamic worlds. We need to review both briefly in order to have a sound point of departure for the analysis.

1.1 Islamism and education

Schooling and education have been central to the Islamist movement from the start. In his classic study of the Muslim Brothers, Richard Mitchell writes that education was the most important activity in the Muslim Brothers' social reform programme, which aimed to modernise Egypt without losing its 'Islamic' identity. The organisation's founder, Hassan al-Banna, maintained that 'education should be neither purely Islamic nor purely secular (i.e. Western), but should harmoniously blend religious character and moral training with scientific training' (Mitchell 1993: 285). The first thing al-Banna did after building a Brothers mosque in the Egyptian town of Ismaïliya was to establish a boys' school, and later he established a girls' school. Various kinds of education on different levels have been an integral part of Islamist organisations' activities in the Middle East and North Africa ever since. For example, in the current context of Palestinian Islamism, Jeroen Gunning states that 'Hamas proposes to educate society into willing an Islamic state through civic participation, consultation exercises and education' (Gunning 2008: 265).

Popular perceptions of Islamic schools in Europe and the USA often assume a rather dramatic form, connecting them with violent forms of Islamist political activism. After the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the age-old religious schools in Muslim countries, the *madrasas*, became the target of criticism, since the Taliban leaders had emerged from such institutions. Many Western commentators expressed suspicions that a 'militant spirit might lie at the heart of *madrasa* education everywhere' (Hefner and Zaman 2007: 1).

Certain strands within research about Islamism nourish such notions and expand their scope to include other kinds of Islamic education as well as *madrasas*[1]. Some recent studies concerned chiefly with militancy and terrorism insist on analysing Islamic educational activities within a picture of radicalism and violence (Levitt 2006, Rougier 2007, Burr and Collins 2006). In these analyses, the primary function of Islamic educational institutions is to instil hatred of Europe and the USA in the young, and in some instances even to condition them into a cult of militancy so that they may later be recruited as 'holy warriors' in Islamic terrorist organisations. News coverage focusing on militant *madrasas*, alarmist research associating all kinds of Islamic social welfare organisations with terrorism and legal action against Islamic charities in the USA and EU accumulate and get conflated in the public consciousness. The result is a monolithic perception of Islamic schools that is blind to the many and often big differences between such institutions. For example, there is a world of difference between Pakistani *madrasas* affiliated to the Taliban and Islamic schools run by organisations affiliated with Hamas or Hizbullah.

To understand Islamist educational institutions better, it is necessary to study their social and political functions, and limiting the scope to the discussion of their possible implication in terrorism is not helpful to such a study. A better way to approach them is found in the body of research that has studied the modern relationship between Islam and education in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Starting in the late nineteenth century, education in many Middle Eastern countries underwent fundamental changes that resulted in a completely different place for Islam in schooling as the post-colonial regimes assumed power in the twentieth century. The dominance of exclusively religious schooling associated with kuttabs (Qur'ān schools) and traditional madrasas (schools with traditional, religious curricula) gave way to modern schools in which Islam became 'a bounded and defined classroom subject rather than a life-defining tradition of learning' (Doumato and Starrett 2007: 13). This made it possible for the states to put Islam to use in the various national projects, a process that has been analysed in detail in the Egyptian case by Gregory Starrett (1998), who speaks of a 'functionalization' of Islam.

However, as an Islamist opposition crystallised from the early 1970s onward in many Arab countries, it too was able to exploit the new, more objective approach to Islam to its own ends. The result of this is, among other things, that public-school curricula and religious instruction in public schools display inconsistencies and contradictions: curriculum designers attempt to defuse Islamism by incorporating some of their positions in the curricula, and teachers influenced by Islamism present a picture of Islam that is at variance with state policies.

[1] There is ample room for confusion here, since the Arabic word *madrasa* means simply 'school' and in the Arab world denotes secular schools as well as religious ones.

It should be kept in mind here that Islamism is but one of the forces working on the presentation of Islam in schools. The state controls the education system in all Arab countries, and in addition, general social trends impinge on Islamic education. As Robert W. Hefner states, Islamic education is 'neither timelessly traditional nor medieval, but an evolving institution visibly marked by the world-transforming forces of our age' (Hefner and Zaman 2007: 28). Thus, Islamic schooling today takes place in institutions as varied as the traditional *madrasas*, Fethullah Gülen's modern semi-religious school movement in Turkey and Central Asia, public schools, and private Islamic schools that teach Islamic subjects alongside secular subjects. In all of them, changing social and political realities affect the presentation of Islam in their teaching.

Existing research on Islam and education has concentrated mostly on Islamic education *per se*, whether in state schools, *madrasas* or private educational ventures. Islamic private schools offering general education have largely been neglected. However, they are an interesting object of study because they occupy a unique position in the web of interests and forces that work on Islam and education. Since they are 'Islamic', it seems reasonable to assume that some kind of 'Islamicness' suffuses their ethos, environment and general teaching, over and above the specifically religious instruction they offer. Most of the schools in the current study were established as ordinary schools offering the same education as public ones, but with some kind of 'Islamic' rationale behind them and their mission. At the same time, they have to work within the framework set by the national curriculum. Seen from another angle, they are a little-studied part of the Islamic movement, and it seems reasonable to suppose that they reflect or even support Islamist organisations and/or ideology to some degree.

The literature on these questions is meagre. Typically, the Islamic movement's educational activities are covered by summary phrases in studies that focus on the political process. Little attention is paid to what actually took and takes place within schools or other educational institutions, such as Qur'ān study centres. The following quote from Mishal and Sela's standard work on Hamas is typical in its disregard for various grassroots activities: 'The association [Young Men's Muslim Association] sponsored various social activities in the fields of culture, education, youth and sports, in accordance with Islamic tradition' (Mishal and Sela 2006: 25). The only comprehensive treatment of Islamism and education in the Arab World is Anne Sofie Roald's study on Islamist theory about education and the actual educational practice of Islamist movements, with case studies from Jordan and Malaysia (Roald 1994). However, Roald focuses less on the practical activities of Islamic schools than on the theories and pedagogic ideology put forward by Islamist thinkers. Her notion of Islamic education seems more akin to the broad notion of Bildung than to the restricted activity of formal schooling. However, she does include some observations of teaching at private Islamic schools in Jordan and Malaysia. For the purposes of this report, one of the most interesting conclusions she draws is that Islamist theory and practice do not correspond with each other – the

teaching at grass-roots level does not reflect the ideas about education propagated by Islamist theorists (ibid. 174–5, 336–7). The cultural and social norms in Jordan and Malaysia penetrate the instruction in either country's Islamic schools, and Islam does not necessarily suffuse the whole teaching environment. Instead, even the teachers in Islamic schools regard 'Islamic education' as having to do first and foremost with the traditional religious subjects, like Qur'ān interpretation, the hadith and Islamic law.

Roald's conclusion begs the question why the Islamic schools are established and what is different about them. Her study's focus on theory and ideology rather than observation of practices makes it difficult to answer these questions, and there is thus a need for more studies of the actual practices of Islamic schools, a gap this report seeks to fill.

1.2 What is Islamism?

It is not possible to say anything about the relationship between Islamism and Islamic private schools without a serviceable definition of Islamism. This is neither an easy exercise nor a purely academic one. Whichever way one looks at it, Islamism is a term used to describe several very different movements that are partly at odds with each other. What one includes in and excludes from a definition of Islamism will have direct consequences for which movements and phenomena it is sensible to include in the discussion.

By way of simplification, we can say that there are two different approaches to Islamism: one minimalist and one maximalist. The minimalist approach centres on the strictly political aspect of Islamism: its elements of a political ideology and the role of Islamist organisations in the political process. This leads to heavy emphasis on doctrine (with focus on thinkers like al-Banna, Khomeini, Sayyid Qutb and even Ibn Taymiyya), political strategy, and the political practices of Islamist organisations like the Muslim Brothers and Hizbullah. Studies informed by this approach often speak about the rise and fall of Islamism, and argue that from its peak in the 1970s it has gradually lost its position as an attractive alternative before descending into extreme violence and sectarianism during the last few years. Titles such as *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Kepel 2002) and *The Failure of Political Islam* (Roy 1994) exemplify this trend.

In contrast, the maximalist approach, which is followed in this report, includes as the object of study all the social, cultural, religious and political aspects of what has often been called the 'Islamic Trend', an expression with wide currency also in the Arab World. What this approach loses in specificity and accuracy it gains in analytic depth. The maximalists are not so concerned with ideological texts, doctrines or the

political fortunes of Islamist organisations; instead, they study the ways in which Islam and Islamic references have steadily become more important parts of practices and discourses in many spheres of public life, whether in culture, education, the workplace or leisure activities. According to this view, Islamism comprises a multitude of different organisations and social groups – some politically active, others involved in wholly apolitical work. As Gregory Starrett argues:

> The Islamic Trend, as I have labeled the wide range of cultural and social phenomena that include specifically political movements, is extremely complex. It ranges from the Islamization of the publishing industry and the increase in enrollment in Islamic studies programs, to the odious violence of terrorist organizations with scripture-based ideologies and the sophisticated legal maneuvering of Islamist lawyers within the court system. [... T]he Trend has moved beyond the level of a "movement" to become one of the most important contexts in which everyday life is lived. (Starrett 1998: 191-192)

Starrett's analytic approach is echoed in later attempts to conceptualise Islamism (e.g. (ICG ICG 2005, Bayat 2005). These studies tend to emphasise the heterogeneous and even fragmentary nature of contemporary Islamism. Still, it is both possible and desirable for analytic purposes to point to a common background and frame of reference for the various Islamic movements in the Arab World.

Islamism, or the Islamic Trend (I will use the terms interchangeably throughout) was based from the outset on two immediate problems: the perceived distortion and marginalisation of Islam in public life, and the cultural and military imperialism of the West, in all its physical, economic and intellectual aspects (Mitchell 1993: 209-295). Islamic history is seen by Islamists as a long period of slow, steady decline ever since the fourth Muslim caliph died in the late seventh century AD. According to Islamist ideology, a corrupt political culture and theological factionalism resulted in the stagnation of Muslim civilisation and ever more pressure from the more dynamic regions outside the Muslim world, specifically Europe. The Muslim Brothers claimed that the conflict with the imperialist West was a conflict not between religions, but between civilisations, and that the twin factors of societal degeneration and imperialism threatened the very existence of Islamic civilisation. The westernisation of the Arab World corrupted society and resulted in cultural schizophrenia and a torn nation.

This two-pronged challenge to Muslim societies is overcome by reinstating the Islamic order (*al-nizam al-Islami*) as intended by God and his prophet Muhammad, first and foremost by effecting a spiritual awakening through activism as well as the implementation of *shari'a*, divine law, in society. It is important to implement the *shari'a* not only because a proper practice of Islam rests on it, but also because of a strong 'social sense of disorder and disequilibrium and historical dislocation' (ibid. 246). (However, it is important to note that right from the start the Muslim Brothers were vague as to

what exactly constituted the *shari'a* and what concrete consequences its implementation would have, apart from creating a just, pious and harmonious society.) In other words, Islamic law provides a cultural anchorage in a rapidly changing world dominated by Western politics, economy and culture.

As Aziz al-Azmeh notes, Islamism is about 'the manufacture of an identity' (Al-Azmeh 1996: 73); other scholars have termed it a kind of cultural nationalism (Ayubi 1991, Burgat 2006). Religion being the defining element of this ideology, Islamists strive toward an Islamisation of both public and private space. This is manifested in people's appearances (veils, prayer marks, beards, etc.) and in the tendency to apply the religious notions of the licit/illicit (*halal/haram*) to public morals and cultural expressions. Consequently, censorship of, and public outcries against, cultural products and practices that are seen to be un- or anti-Islamic have been common in many Arab countries during the last thirty years. Islamism has also traditionally propagated conservative views of gender roles and relationships, highlighting women's primary roles as mothers/housewives and the supposed moral dangers of males and females' mixing in school and at the workplace.

1.3 The Social movement theory approach

Notwithstanding these general characteristics of the Islamic Trend, it has become increasingly clear that the diverse array of actors labelled 'Islamists' today is so heterogeneous that generalisations of the kind made above are not enough to account for them properly. It is here that the approach taken by social movement theory (SMT) has something valuable to offer. In recent years, research on Islamism has increasingly come to focus on Islamism as a social movement. The result of this is that more attention has been paid to grass-roots activism in a field that was traditionally concerned primarily with ideologues, their thoughts and the political process in which these thoughts were activated. Recent years have seen a number of publications about Islamism based on close observation of grass-roots activism. Research inspired by SMT has focused less on ideology than the diverse, day-to-day workings of various Islamic organisations that are more or less associated with Islamic political movements and to a great degree share their general outlook. By systematically attending to organisational work outside the political process *per se*, such studies have offered new insights into a number of issues: the robust organisation of these movements (Munson 2001, White 2002), how they mobilise new segments of the population politically (Wickham 2002, Munson 2001), how they create new bonds of social solidarity (Clark 2004), and how they create their own social institutions that operate in parallel with the state's welfare services (Clark 2004, Wickham 2002). In the following, we adopt this grass-roots perspective in order

better to understand the ideas, motives and practices at work in organisations that run Islamic schools. An important question in this regard is to what extent and how the ideas and practices in Islamic schools correspond to the ideas and practices of local Islamism (i.e. Hamas) and the Islamic Trend in a wider sense.

1.4 Data and methodology

This report is based on a combination of fieldwork and text studies. The fieldwork in the West Bank was carried out in three rounds in 2009 (May, September and November). We visited the offices of two charitable associations that run schools and we interviewed administrators and teachers in seven Islamic schools located in Hebron, the Ramallah area, Nablus and Jenin. We also interviewed officials of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) in Ramallah, and we observed classes in two Islamic schools to see how teaching was conducted in practice. The fieldwork in Gaza took place in September and November 2009 and included visits to three charitable associations and seven Islamic schools. In Gaza, we were also able to interview some parents and students at Islamic schools.

Islamic schools in Jerusalem are not part of the present report. Palestinian schooling in Jerusalem is a special and highly complicated case that merits its own study, and will not be dealt with here.

The primary sources consist of two main kinds of material: transcripts from interviews and notes during visits to schools, and the detailed plans, reports and statistics made by the MoEHE, some of which are issued on its website (www.moehe.gov.ps).

2 Background: Some relevant aspects of the Palestinian system of education

Palestinian primary and secondary education is the responsibility of the Palestinian MoEHE, but there are three kinds of schools at primary and secondary level: government schools, which constitute the great majority in the West Bank (providing for 81% of a total of 654,217 students); UNRWA schools for refugees (9%) and private schools (10%).[2] Schooling is meant to be universal, and although not all Palestinian children receive primary education, Palestinians nevertheless boast a comparatively high level of literacy, not least considering that there is no proper state in the Palestinian Territories (according to UNICEF, the adult literacy rate in 2007 was 93%, compared with Syria's 83% and Egypt's 72%).[3]

With the advent of the Palestinian National Authority, great changes were introduced in education. Before 1994, schools in the West Bank used the Jordanian curriculum, while schools in Gaza used the Egyptian one. Palestinian history and culture were neglected, as were the schools themselves, being run by the Israeli occupation authorities. The PNA inherited a school system that struggled and still struggles with great challenges, and immediately started reforming education. A historically bold project was inaugurated: the devising of a new, national curriculum for primary and secondary education, with new books for each subject and grade. To the MoEHE's great credit, the project has kept up with its schedule, and in 2006, phasing-in of the new curriculum at all levels was completed, including 450 new textbooks written between 1998 and 2006. The national curriculum is obligatory for all schools, including private and UNRWA schools, thus securing a certain degree of uniformity in primary and secondary education.

The MoEHE's second five-year plan, for 2008–2012, is entitled *Towards Quality Education for Development*. It states three central goals for primary and secondary education (MoEHE 2008: 20): (1) to increase the access of school-aged children and students of all education levels and improve the education system's ability to retain them (Access); (2) to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Quality), and (3)

[2] Statistics for 2007–8 retrieved from the MoEHE's website: http://www.mohe.gov.ps/stats/stats-2008/school2008/Table5.htm (accessed 1 July 2009)

[3] Statistics retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/oPt_statistics.html

to develop the capacity for planning and management and to improve the financial and management systems used (Management). Among the values the MoEHE wants education to foster are: pride in Palestinian religion, nationality, and Arabic-Islamic culture; openness to other cultures and active pursuit of knowledge; equality between men and women, and religious tolerance. These statements make it clear that education is seen as a major instrument for nation building, and that Islamic culture and religion are seen as integrated parts of the educational endeavour, at the same time as openness to other traditions and world views is emphasised. In other words, the ministry's vision is not one of a purely secular education; it is, rather, a vision of combining a mild form of religious and cultural nationalism with openness and development.

One of the main challenges in realising this vision is, according to the MoEHE itself, the poor quality of education: the 'quality of education at all levels is still inadequate. Improvement of quality will be a major focus in the coming period' (ibid. 50). This is confirmed by Jamil Ishtayyi at the MoEHE's department for international and public relations, who adds that, aside from the effort to improve the quality of teaching, the MoEHE also prioritises the extremely difficult schooling situation in East Jerusalem. Quite apart from that, Ishtayyi's assessment as a previous national inspector of schools is that private schools, whether religious or not, generally offer the best schooling in Palestine. In his view, the MoEHE's public schools in the West Bank rank second, while the quality is lowest in Gaza.[4]

Logically, then, one of the tools for improving quality in teaching is to encourage 'private investment in education [...] at all levels and in all kinds of education'. The report does not go into detail about the kind of private schooling the MoEHE would like to see more of, and so one must assume that Christian, Islamic and secular private schools are all considered as valuable partners in the general endeavour to educate the largest possible number of Palestinian children in the best possible way.

[4] The overall test performance of UNRWA schools has been consistently better than that of MoEHE schools. Firstly, these schools have been established for much longer and, up until the establishment of the PA in 1994, MoEHE schools were under the direct control of the Israeli Government and, as a result, seem to have received less attention. Secondly, teachers' pay has, until recently, been considerably higher at UNRWA schools. Thirdly, UNRWA has well-established systems for the continuous professional development of both teachers and school managers, and a more effective and relevant network of supervision and inspection services. See the 2006 report from the World Bank: *West Bank and Gaza: Education Sector Analysis – Impressive Achievements Under Harsh Conditions and the Way Forward to Consolidate a Quality Education System.*

2.1 The Scope of Islamic education in the West Bank and Gaza

According to the World Bank, 66,000 primary- and secondary-level students enrolled in private schools in 2005–6 in Gaza and the West Bank, compared to 757,000 in the government schools (Anon. 2006). There seems to be a small increase in private schooling, since the MoEHE's figures for 2007–8 indicate that 10 per cent of all students attend private schools (cf. p. 13). In its statistics, the MoEHE does not provide information on the nature of the different private schools, i.e. whether they are secular, Christian or Islamic. In spite of repeated inquiries to the MoEHE it has not been possible to obtain such detailed data, so it is difficult accurately to estimate the percentage of Islamic private schools in the Palestinian Territories.

However, through the fieldwork carried out for this report in May–November 2009, we have at least some indication of their extent. In the West Bank, concentrating on the Nablus, Ramallah and Hebron areas, we were quickly able to identify from four to six schools in each, with an average of about 500 students in each school. There is reason to believe that the actual number is greater, and in addition, we did not have time to visit smaller towns or villages outside these centres, with the exception of the town of Jenin. In Gaza, the picture seems to be fairly similar; however, it is likely that the easier political situation for Islamic schools there has resulted in a greater percentage of Islamic schools in relation to the total. Moreover, the Islamic private schools are well-known institutions among Palestinians, as was made clear during interviews. We may conclude, then, that the Islamic private schools constitute a small but nonetheless substantial part of the education system in the Palestinian Territories, catering to thousands of families in the West Bank and Gaza.

3 The Role of Islamic private schools in the education system

3.1 General characteristics of Islamic schools

Most of the Islamic private schools in the West Bank and Gaza are run by Islamic NGOs – *zakat* committees or private-sector charitable associations.[5] These schools are all charitable, in the sense that they are not run for profit. They charge fees, but these are modest and a lesser or greater number of the students receive support that either partially or fully covers their tuition. While some such scholarships are granted to outstanding students, most of the support is reserved for orphans (in this context, normally children who have lost their fathers or who are born outside of wedlock and rejected by their families). This is not just because there are many orphans in the West Bank and Gaza. Special care for orphans is an Islamic tradition with deep historical roots, and is the focus of most Islamic charities today (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009: 102-104). Accordingly, most of the schools we visited had reserved a percentage of their capacity for orphans, ranging from the Gazan al-Salah association schools (up to 90 %) to the more business-like Islamic School for Boys in Nablus, where only a small minority of the students were orphans.

The other students pay tuition fees. Compared to the fees charged by Christian private schools, which have a long history in the West Bank, and also by the newer secular for-profit private schools, those charged by Islamic private schools are modest. Usually, they range between 2,500 ILS and 4,000 ILS per year, including transport and meals, in comparison to approximately 10,000 ILS for the upper-end (Quaker) Friends School. As with Christian private schools in the Palestinian Territories, most of the Islamic schools are in part funded by private donors through a charity organisation. Funds come from local, regional and international donors. Also as with Christian private schools, the Islamic schools usually cover parts of the tuition fees for students who cannot afford to pay the full amounts. This support is often dependent on the students' performance in end-of-term exams.

[5] *Zakat* committees receive and administer the (theoretically) obligatory Muslim tax (*al-zakat*) to the poor and needy. They are a long-standing feature of modern Palestinian society.

We did not find any co-educational Islamic private schools. Unlike many Christian schools (but like most public and UNRWA schools), Islamic schools are strictly boys' or girls' schools, at least from the fourth grade upward.

As for teaching, Islamic schools are fully integrated into the national Palestinian system, which also unites the West Bank and Gaza, in spite of the rift between Hamas and Fatah. All the schools in the Palestinian Territory currently follow the new national curriculum, which also provides textbooks in all the subjects for all grades. The Islamic schools are also subject to regular inspection by the MoEHE. The feeling reported in earlier research, that inspections are carried out less frequently in these schools than in public schools (Drury et al. 2005: 136-137), seems to have changed, as the PA has tightened its monitoring system for schools since 2006.

Lastly, a shared feature of all the private Islamic schools is that class sizes are smaller than in public and UNRWA schools. While classes may consist of more than 40 students in public and UNRWA schools (with conditions being worst in Gaza), the Islamic private schools restrict class size to between 24 and 30 students.[6]

3.2 Background to the establishment of Islamic schools

There are interesting differences between the different schools we visited as regards the reasons for their establishment. It is possible to discern a continuum from the almost purely charitable schools to the almost purely commercial ones.

Most schools are of a charitable nature, the reason for their establishment being to provide orphans with a good education and social safety net. This is the case with schools such as al-Salah (Gaza) and Hebron Charitable Society's school for orphans in the West Bank.[7] Other schools have at least two goals. On the one hand, they provide good education to clever students who cannot afford fees, by giving them scholarships, and they allocate some places to orphans. On the other hand, they are characterised by a spirit of entrepreneurship, aiming to raise the level of education and development in local society. One important aim for schools such as the Nablus Islamic schools is to achieve good results in order to attract good students. This, together with tuition fees, will in turn make it easier to recruit the best teachers by giving them more opportunities than in public schools, and also by offering them a higher salary or other advantages over public-school employment. Finally, there are schools where the initial

[6] However, in at least one of the schools, theory and practice diverged, as there were 36 students in both the English and Arabic classes

[7] Interviews with Alia Shahin, project director at the al-Salah association in Gaza, September 2009, and Khalid Amayreh, journalist and political analyst in al-Dura, 8 September 2009

impetus seems to have been a desire to create jobs and income, and where the religious component of the schools comes as a natural consequence of the founders' own convictions. This is the case with Applied Nur al-Hudā schools in Baytuniya (West Bank). During an interview with the general director, a Salafi who sympathises with official Islamic doctrine in Saudi Arabia, it became abundantly clear that his school was first and foremost a business venture, albeit one in which he invested considerable feelings and prestige. His schools were built on family property with money he had earned from his factory and import-export business, and he ran them as a company, complaining that they had failed to produce much profit so far – 'but once you have started two schools for 1,000 students, it is not something you can just stop doing, although it is not very profitable'. It was clear that he enjoyed his job and found it very meaningful, but it was also clear that he did it because he was an energetic entrepreneur and this was one way among others of making money.[8]

With regard to many Islamic private schools, the sheer drive to create jobs and activity should not be underestimated. In these schools, the inculcation of religious values and ideas is one goal, but not the only one. Thus, while some schools are based on purely philanthropic ideas, others combine the aim of giving children a religiously coloured education with a keen sense of academic competition, while for others again the school seems to be basically a for-profit establishment that offers more challenges than would a clothes shop. It can safely be said that, to the extent that religious ideology is part of these schools' *raison d'être*, it is manifested in philanthropic concerns, not political ones. Moreover, the term 'religious ideology' needs to be defined clearly in this context. To what extent are these schools part of Hamas's overall religio-political scheme, for example? We will return to this question in section four.

3.3 The 'Islamic' aspect of schools

Religious private schools of any kind are expected to have some religious aims that they seek to fulfil, this being what distinguishes them from public schools. In Norway, for example, Val Christian Secondary School states that it 'wishes to be a school that promotes Christian values. Christian instruction and daily religious gatherings are part of the educational provision.'[9]

Such a rationale and such extracurricular activities are also part of private Islamic schools in the West Bank and Gaza. Islamic schools invariably offer extra classes in religious studies, which are mostly used to study and memorise the Qur'ān. In addi-

[8] Interview in Baytuniya in the West Bank, 10 September 2009

[9] http://www.val.vgs.no/Val/Web.nsf/NyttigABOUT?OpenForm&T=

tion, they will often have allocated space to spacious prayer rooms within the school premises. Brochures and school magazines devote considerable numbers of pages to Islamic content. For example, the 2008–9 school magazine of the Applied Nur al-Hudā schools features one article about the famous Islamic juridical thinker al-Shāfi'ī; another that argues that the timing of the five prayers is divinely designed to benefit human health, and an interpretation of the Morning Hours, Sura 93 of the Qur'ān.

However, when, during interviews, we probed as to what the 'Islamicity' of the schools consisted of, religious teachings or precepts were not mentioned by school administrators or teachers. Instead, the three points that were repeatedly stressed were educational quality, morals and discipline.

All the school officials and teachers who were interviewed stated that Islamic private schools had a stronger sense of morality than public schools, expressed in the lack of fighting, 'bad' language and behaviour. This point seems to be most important in relation to boys' schools, as public schools for girls are apparently less ridden with disciplinary problems. Swearing or improper speech is not tolerated either in or outside of class in Islamic schools, and the fact that they all offer transportation ensures that children do not walk the streets after school and that they thus avoid the perceived negative effects this would have on their morality.

As for discipline, it includes both class behaviour and study routines. Practices varied in the classes that were visited: while in some the students would all stand up and greet the teacher upon his or her arrival with the formal *al-salaam 'alaykum wa-rahmat-ul'lah wa-barakatuh*, in others they would sit and greet the teacher with a less formal 'Good morning'. However, in all classes near total silence reigned unless the students were asked to speak, and the general level of attention seemed very high. If there was a bit of mumbling and whispering, or if the enthusiasm became too clamorous, teachers would effortlessly silence the classes, either by asking them quietly to calm down, or simply by not speaking for a couple of seconds. The students were also encouraged to apply strict discipline in their studies. At the Islamic Secondary School for Boys in Nablus, for example, the teaching staff had worked out detailed schedules for students in the final grade that encouraged them to work until late in the evening. There is of course no guarantee that students actually do what they are asked to, but one indicator that many of them do is the relatively high level of achievement for this school in the final *tawjihi* exams at the end of the twelfth year.[10]

It is also worth mentioning that some teachers drew attention to the fact that there was no form of physical punishment in their school. We never heard abusive language from any teachers either, whether in the classes we sat in or from neighbouring classrooms (doors were often open). That is noteworthy in the Palestinian context, where

[10] In 2007–8, three of the school's students were among the top ten nationwide, and none of the students failed in the exam (al-Madaris al-Islamiyya 2009)

corporal punishment and abusive language is often found in public schools, and to some extent in private schools.[11]

The issue of quality was the one with which school administrations clearly seemed most concerned. This probably has to do with the fact that many of the Islamic schools charge modest annual fees, and are thus dependent on a good reputation in order to attract new students. During interviews, administrators would stress that they had elaborate and strict procedures for appointing new teachers. Only the ones with the best results from university were considered, and they were filtered via detailed interviews.[12] A lot of attention was given to the students' results: in the headmistress's office at the girls' school in Ramallah, a diploma adorned the wall, stating that one student from the school had ranked number one in the sciences branch of the *tawjihi* exams in 2007–8. At the Islamic Secondary School for Boys in Nablus, two big posters with the names, results and municipal rankings for all the students in the graduate class of 2008–9 flanked the entrance gate to the school at the time of our visit in the beginning of September 2009. Finally, when we asked school officials what distinguished the schools from public ones, they would mention quality, discipline and morals (*akhlāq*) – in that order.

3.4 Perceptions of the role of Islamic schools in the education system

Why do parents send their children to Islamic private schools rather than other schools? There may of course be a great number of reasons for doing so, and the scope of this study does not include interviews with or surveys among parents. However, by combining previous survey results and interviews with school administrations and observers, we get some probable answers.

According to the 2005 Fafo report *Service Delivery Studies in the Middle East*, respondents choose private schools because of 'better quality teaching [...], better language teaching [...] and better treatment and follow-up of students. The perception is that pupils learn to behave well and get better moral values than in public schools' (Drury et al. 2005: 133). The report does not ask questions about Islamic schools specifically, but it seems that they are not viewed as significantly different from other, Christian or non-denominational private schools. When administrators at Islamic

[11] Interview with Signe Marie Breivik, responsible for educational affairs at the Norwegian Representative Office in al-Ram, 11 September 2009

[12] Interview with headmaster at a boys' school in Nablus, 11 May 2009; interview with headmistress at Hebron girls' school, 18 November 2009

private schools are asked why people send their children to these schools, they answer that they think it is because of quality that is higher than in public schools, more individual follow-up of students, better discipline and higher morals.

One simple but important factor seems to be that all these schools provide transportation to and from school. That way the children are not left to roam the streets once school is finished, the common assumption being that bad language and behaviour are the result of walking the streets. Attention to individual students also makes for a higher sense of trust and security among parents. As one headmaster said: 'In public schools, nobody cares if Yahya does not appear in class. Here, if the parents have not notified us in advance, we immediately call them and ask why he has not turned up. So the parents know that their sons are well looked after here.'[13]

School officials repeatedly stated that they thought parents enjoyed a heightened sense of security and confidence in relation to private Islamic schools. Their impression was corroborated by observers. Political analyst and journalist Khalid Amayreh sat on a *zakat* committee that administered charity work for a number of years, and calculated that, all in all, he had spent 15,000 USD on private education for his children. Amayreh states that in Islamic schools the pupils do not learn bad words, they are not beaten by teachers, they are picked up in buses and not left to loiter on the streets after school. According to him, parents feel more at ease when leaving their children in the hands of these schools.[14]

Parents' trust in Islamic schools is doubtless also connected to the fact that the schools are firmly entrenched in their local environments. They are either run by local *zakat* committees or charity boards that are well known and recruit trusted local people as board members. In addition, these associations often run other projects that probably earn them credibility and respect among the local population. For example, the Young Men's Muslim Association in Hebron runs not only four schools and six kindergartens, but also a kitchen supply shop for home-cooked food to employ poor women and an extensive aid programme for poor people and orphans.[15]

As for the perspective of the teachers, there are different reasons why they prefer to work in Islamic private schools instead of public ones. Payment can be a factor: one teacher mentioned that he had been recruited from another private school with the offer of a significantly higher salary. However, Islamic schools generally pay their teachers the same as public schools do, and so there must be other reasons why the highly qualified teachers seem to prefer jobs at private schools instead of public ones. Both teachers and directors of schools stated that teachers chose Islamic schools over the

[13] Interview in Nablus, 11 May 2009

[14] Interview in al-Dura, 8 September 2009

[15] Interview in Hebron, 18 November 2009

public ones because there is more room for creativity, better and fairer opportunities for advancement, and a workplace characterised by transparency and the potential to influence decision-making.[16]

As for the MoEHE in Ramallah, it regards Islamic private schools as an unqualified good. For the MoEHE, these schools contribute to relieving a capacity problem still present in the West Bank. Jamil Ishtayyi at the MoEHE's department for foreign relations considers the Islamic schools to be of higher quality than the public schools. The MoEHE officials also seem very relaxed about the ideological aspect of Islamic schools. Ishtayyi's former job was as a school inspector, whose job it is to check that schools comply with official standards. He visited several Islamic private schools in this capacity and he maintains that he never noticed anything ideological about them. There is no sectarian direction. They do teach more Islamic subjects – lessons in Qur'ānic recitation, for example – but he regards this as good since it improves the students' proficiency in Classical Arabic.[17] Other officials at the MoEHE stress that they regard Islamic private schools as fully integrated parts of the national education system, so as far as the MoEHE is concerned, there is no problematic aspect to these schools.[18]

While the MoEHE seems to regard the Islamic private schools favourably, there is evidence that other governmental bodies are less enthusiastic about them, for obvious political reasons. After the Fatah-Hamas crisis in 2006, which left Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip and Fatah in control of the West Bank, the board members of most *zakat* committees were subjected to strict political control, and some teachers and school directors in Islamic private schools were forced to resign. We return to this subject in section 5.1.

3.5 The Special case of Gaza

Islamic private schools and indeed Islamic charitable associations in Gaza merit a separate section, since, unlike those in most other Arab countries, they are now subject to the rule of an explicitly Islamist government made up chiefly, if not entirely, of Hamas activists. This fact has implications for the private schools' role in the education system. However, it should be noted that in Gaza, as much as in the West Bank, Islamic social institutions 'long preceded [their] political counterpart and will, in all likelihood, long

[16] Interviews with deputy director and director of Islamic schools in Ramallah and Hebron, 10 September and 18 November 2009, respectively

[17] Interview with the author at the MoEHE in Ramallah, 10 September 2009

[18] Interview with Su'ad al-Qaddoumi, deputy general director of education at the MoEHE in Ramallah, 17 November 2009

outlive it' (Roy 2007: 187). In other words, in spite of the political changes that have taken place recently in the Palestinian Territories, the similarities between Islamic charitable associations, and, by extension, between Islamic private schools, in the West Bank and Gaza seem to be more noteworthy than the differences.

Still, differences do obtain. They have to do with the role and extent of Islamic social institutions in Gaza; the distinction between private religious and public schools; the violence that haunts Gaza regularly, and the conservative nature of Gazan society.

According to Sarah Roy, at the beginning of the 2000s, the MoEHE estimated that 65 per cent of all educational institutions (presumably including nurseries) were 'Islamic' (Roy 2007: 299–300). This very high percentage probably has to do with the fact that ever since the war and the influx of refugees in 1948, Gaza has been an area facing huge social and economic challenges (Kimmerling and Migdal 2003: 227-231). The Egyptian and Israeli administrations that provided educational and other services before the Palestinian National Authority took over in 1994 did little to improve the situation. In the absence of adequate services, Islamic organisations, notably the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brothers, took it upon themselves to offer welfare and aid to the people. Ahmad Yasin's movement, which became progressively more politicised until it resulted in the establishment of Hamas, earned its widespread popularity in large part as a result of social welfare activities. Islamic social institutions have thus been tied more closely to politics than has been the case in the West Bank, where the Jordanian-affiliated Muslim Brothers branch maintained a lower political profile than its Gazan counterpart. Accordingly, Islamic private schools in Gaza are less eager to dissociate themselves from politics. While directors and staff in the West Bank Islamic schools invariably stressed that they stay out of politics and are pure welfare institutions, their counterparts in Gaza openly align with Hamas, and the theme of resistance against Israel was also present during interviews with them.

With the advent of the Hamas government after 2006, the distinction between public and private Islamic schools became blurred in some respects, since the political movement that sprang out of the general Islamic movement now also supervised and controlled the public school system. In addition, one must assume that many of the directors of the Islamic schools have close ties to the party now governing Gaza – not the situation in the West Bank. However, our fieldwork shows that, as well as the difference in content, the formal organisational distinctions still obtain between private and public schools in Gaza.

Thus the three Hamas-affiliated Dar al-Arqam schools, the first of which was founded in 2000, boast many of the same features as their well-to-do counterparts in Hebron: classes of thirty or fewer students, well-equipped physics and computer labs, cleanliness, discipline and good results. Orphans and poor students get tuition and equipment for free, while other students pay fees ranging from 1,500 ILS to 2,100 ILS per year. Money comes from the Qatari Shaykh 'Id Bin Muhammad al-Thani

Charity, as well as from other regional and local donors. These schools also have extra Qur'ān classes. A report in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, which is otherwise very positive about the school, makes a point of these classes, stating that 'the big question of what precisely the children are taught from the Koran, with what interpretation, remained unanswered' (Issacharoff 2006). It is not clear from the report whether the reason for this was that the reporter in fact failed to pose the question. We did ask it during fieldwork, and the answer was that these classes were used to practise Qur'ān memorisation. School officials also added that there were extra classes in English as well, just as in Islamic schools in the West Bank.[19] There is hardly reason to believe that the Qur'ān classes in the Dar al-Arqam schools are significantly different from those in other Islamic schools, where the focus is on learning to recite and memorise verses without the inclusion of any particular political message in these activities.

School officials in some Hamas-affiliated Gaza schools display a more political bent than their counterparts in the West Bank. Thus, one headmaster explained that one of many goals at his school was to 'produce the generation of hope and victory'.[20] It is hard to dissociate such statements from the greatest difference between schools in Gaza and schools in the West Bank: the former have been subjected to devastating attacks by the Israeli Army during the Second Intifada, and, most recently, during the aggression against Gaza in December 2008–January 2009. Muhammad Hassan Sham'a, chairman of the board of trustees of the Dar al-Arqam association, states that twenty classrooms in the first Dar al-Arqam school were destroyed in Israeli attacks during the Second Intifada.[21] Many of the students in private and public schools in Gaza had their homes partly or wholly demolished during the Gaza War, which influenced the general mood and atmosphere in the schools.

One other major difference between Gaza and the West Bank that holds for both public and private schools is that Gaza is a socially conservative society. With Hamas in power since 2006, enforcement of conservative moral norms seems to have increased. There were reports in 2009 that a number of school directors had instructed students in girls-only schools to quit wearing jeans and to don the veil and long dress instead. Jeans were apparently viewed as un-Islamic attire. Although it seems that these activities were carried out by 'freelance' grass-roots Hamas activists, and that the Hamas government in Gaza denied having anything to do with them, they are indicative of a more authoritarian Islamic social atmosphere than the one prevailing in the West Bank. However, this is a general characteristic that does not apply to Islamic private schools

[19] Interview with Wafa Jawdat Abu Sido, headmistress of Dar al-Arqam girls' school in Gaza, and Mahmud Khalil al-Hilo, headmaster of Dar al-Arqam elementary school in Gaza, 10 and 9 September 2009, respectively

[20] Interview in Gaza, 8 September 2009

[21] Interview in Gaza, 8 September 2009

in particular. As one liberal Hamas activist in Nablus commented: 'Gaza is generally more conservative than the West Bank. When I speak to a Fatah activist from Gaza, it is like speaking to a Hamas activist in the West Bank – I am more in tune with the Fatah man in Gaza than the Hamas sympathiser in Gaza.' [22]

These differences notwithstanding, it is the similarities between Islamic private schools in the West Bank and Gaza that stand out most clearly. Comparing Islamic private schools with public and UNRWA ones, teachers and parents in the Gaza Strip would mention the same advantages as their West Bank counterparts. The Islamic private schools are popular because of their quality – the lower number of students in class, their extra attention to teaching the Qur'ān and Islamic morals, their care for orphans and the poor, and the quality of education.[23]

3.6 Conclusion: The Role of Islamic schools in the national Palestinian education system

In terms of the MoEHE's aims of improving access, quality and management of education (cf. section 2), the private Islamic schools seem to be a well-integrated and constructive part of the national Palestinian education system. Although they do not play a big role nationally, they have an important function in their local environments, offering facilities and instruction that are slightly or significantly better than those the public and UNRWA schools do. They follow the same curriculum as all other schools, the major difference in this respect being that they generally add to this up to five hours a week, divided mainly between Qur'ān and English lessons. As for their extracurricular activities, they are also well integrated into the national system, whether one looks at sports or cultural activities. MoEHE officials state that the Islamic private schools help relieve a capacity problem, thus contributing to the aim of increased access. As for management, interviews with teachers and managers of the Islamic private schools reveal that they feel the system is truly merit-based, and that there are more opportunities for creativity and initiative. This in turn makes for more dynamic school management. All in all, whether situated in Gaza or in the West Bank, the Islamic private schools seem to contribute to the MoEHE's current goals.

Allowing for the big political, developmental and administrative differences between Norway and the Palestinian Territories, it does not seem too far off the mark to compare the Islamic private schools to their Christian counterparts in Norway. Education in Norway is tightly controlled by the state, and there are nationwide, compulsory teach-

[22] Interview in Nablus, 16 November 2009

[23] Nine interviews with teachers and parents/guardians in Gaza, 10–19 November 2009

ing plans. Christian private schools in Norway work according to the same regulations as public schools, and teach the same curricula. Like Islamic private schools, they invoke religious (Christian) values in their teaching and in the social activities that take place in school. For example, they may have daily prayer gatherings between classes, and a Christian ethos permeates the school environment. Christian schools in Norway do not have the welfare aspect that Islamic schools have; since high-quality public education is available to all in Norway, they are purely an alternative to the secular public schools. However, parents who send their children to Christian schools are likely to cite the same reasons as the Palestinian parents who send their children to Islamic schools: they want an education based on religious principles and values, they want their children to get better acquainted with and even immersed in the religious heritage, and they feel that religious schools offer a safer social environment than public schools.

However, although the Islamic private schools are well integrated into the Palestinian education system, their religious orientation is much more contested than that of Norwegian Christian private schools. The reason for this is of course that civil Islamic activism, such as these schools are a part of, is often connected to political movements, in this case Hamas. The schools are seen as tools to indoctrinate children with Islamist ideology and recruit activists who engage in violent acts against fellow Palestinians and against Israelis. We therefore have to investigate in more detail the Islamic schools' connection to Islamist ideology and to Hamas as a political organisation. This is the purpose of the next chapter.

4 The Role of Islamic schools in Islamism

4.1 Formal and informal affiliation between Islamic schools and Hamas

In research on Islamism, it is common to make general assertions about organisational and economic links between Islamist organisations such as the Muslim Brothers or Hamas and various civil society initiatives. It is beyond doubt that Islamist organisations are often heavily involved in various parts of civil society; the Egyptian Muslim Brothers' penetration of professional syndicates in the 1980s is perhaps the best example (Wickham 2002). In the case of the Palestinian Territories, there seems to be rather wide agreement that there is a high degree of unity and cohesion between different 'Islamic' organisations. For example, Mishal and Sela provide an organisational chart of Hamas that gives the impression that most of the educational institutions in the Palestinian Territories that identify themselves as Islamic are closely affiliated to Hamas (Mishal and Sela 2006: 173). Other research, especially within the field of security and terrorism studies, states this affiliation much more forcefully (Levitt 2006: 2–3; Burr and Collins 2006).

However, such linkages are often made on the basis of secondary literature rather than fieldwork, and the picture gets a lot more complicated once the realities on the ground are taken into account. One good example of this is Janine Clark's study of Islamic clinics in Jordan and Egypt, in which she argues that the network of Islamic welfare institutions is less about ideology or even welfare than it is about networking among the middle and upper-middle classes (Clark 2004: 31). On this background, the supposition that Islamic schools are an extension of Hamas's organisational apparatus should be carefully investigated, as should the question of what such a supposed linkage actually means in practice.

It is clear that a number of educational institutions are closely affiliated with Hamas. Most of these are situated in Gaza. The best known is probably the Islamic University, which has had an Islamist profile since the 1980s. It is also generally acknowledged that many kindergartens (which fall outside the scope of the present report) are affiliated to Hamas. In addition, quite a few schools are considered by the population in Gaza to be 'Hamas' schools, in the sense that some of the staff are well-known Hamas activists and/or that Hamas contributes to the schools by directing charity to them from abroad. This seems to be the case with the schools that belong to the al-Salah and Dar

al-Arqam associations, the latter of which was in fact founded by Ahmad Yasin (who also founded Hamas).

While several Islamic schools are directly affiliated with Hamas, it is not difficult to find others that have no links at all to the movement. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the schools founded by Salafis. The general director of one such school is vehement in his criticism of Hamas. He wants to stay far away from 'politics and killing and explosions', as he says, and thinks that because of this, parents like the school.[24] According to him, 90 per cent of his approximately 1,000 students are from families that sympathise with Fatah. They send their children to his school because it inculcates them with good morals and provides high-quality education. In his view, Hamas members mix politics and religion in a way that only tarnishes the latter, and he claims they are only 'seeking positions'. He also says Hamas is an Iranian current, indicating that his criticism has an ideological aspect to it, too – Salafis are well known for their negative attitudes to Shi'ism. He gives President Mahmud Abbas his full support, and interestingly, his argumentation is based on classical Islamic political law. Employing words and concepts from fourteenth-century Islamic treatises about the Islamic state, he describes Abbas as the 'person in authority' (*walī al-amr*) who commands his subjects' obedience. To the extent that he uses his school as a missionary tool, his ideology, although Islamist, is clearly at odds with that of Hamas, and what is more, it is explicitly apolitical.

In the middle of the spectrum, there are schools that, as far as we could ascertain, do not have any ties to Hamas, but whose staff probably sympathise with the idea that Islamic norms and precepts should be the basis for the national struggle and for building a good and harmonious society. The headmaster at an Islamic school in Nablus emphasised that the school was established as a result of educational concerns and not ideological ones.[25] The historical background for the establishment of the school, as well as its presentation of itself in brochures to the parents, supported this claim. At the same time, he did not conceal the fact that he was one of the 415 Islamist activists the Israeli state had deported to Lebanon in 1992. Most of those deported were members of Hamas. It seems reasonable to suppose that the headmaster and some members of the staff at the school are affiliated with Hamas, in informal ways at least. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that the headmaster in question was forced to resign by the Palestinian Authority in September 2009, despite running the school in a professional and successful way as far as the authors of this report could ascertain.

At the other end of the spectrum, some of the Islamic schools in Gaza are closely affiliated with Hamas. How they were established and by whom is one indicator of this; another is widespread local assumptions about funding. The popular Dar al-Arqam

[24] Interview in Baytuniya, 10 September 2009

[25] Interview in Nablus, 11 May 2009

schools are the brainchild of the late Hamas spiritual leader Ahmad Yasin. He believed that the schools would be 'the first station to create a dogmatic Islamic generation that believes in God and the Prophet Muhammad, and will be able to carry the flag of struggling and fighting the occupiers to liberate Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine'.[26] Al-Salah schools are also widely regarded as 'Hamas' schools. None of their officials mentioned Hamas as a direct financial contributor (citing instead Gulf charities and contributions by Palestinians locally and abroad). Nevertheless, local residents and activists involved in Islamic charity on the West Bank assert that certain schools in Gaza either directly or indirectly receive substantial economic support from Hamas. Indirect support means that Hamas officials lobby to channel financial aid in the direction of Islamic schools, or that Hamas officials contribute money to these schools via third-party donors.

However, it is not easy to determine the exact nature of the economic links and dependencies between various charities and Hamas as a political and social organisation, whether in the West Bank or in Gaza. Most of the private Islamic schools are charitable. They usually belong to a *zakat* committee or another kind of charity association whose board has the financial and administrative responsibility for the schools, even if they seem rarely to intervene in the schools' day-to-day running. The schools are in large part economically dependent on these boards and the funds they collect locally and from abroad. It is known that Hamas receives substantial support from the Gulf countries, Jordan and Syria, and that the organisation channels this support into various social and political activities (Mishal and Sela 2006: 21-22, Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009: 106). However, the so-called representative offices that collect funds in these countries are staffed by both Hamas members and other Palestinian Islamic activists who do not belong to Hamas but who also raise money for social purposes (al-Rantawi 2009). Quite apart from this, the sobering remarks made in a report by the International Crisis Group still obtain:

> [W]hat exactly does political 'affiliation' [with Hamas] mean in a context where everyone is either affiliated with a political movement to some degree or labelled as such? Can you assign political 'affiliation' to an organisation if it does not have a political agenda and its leader is not affiliated to the extent that he acts on behalf of a political movement as opposed to his institution? (ICG 2003: 11)

Our fieldwork supports this scepticism about identifying schools as integrated parts of Hamas's organisation network, even if the charities that run them receive funds from the organisation. The schools we visited are not sectarian in nature. They are open to anyone who fulfils the social criteria (poverty and/or deceased father) or pays the

[26] Interview with Muhammad Hassan Sham'a, chairman of the board of trustees at the Dar al-Arqam association in Gaza, 8 September 2009

fees and displays good behaviour. Consequently, they cannot be regarded as part of a Hamas social safety net for Hamas's own members and sympathisers. The schools were not closely monitored by the charity boards that formally run them, and the principals' accounts of their activities and initiatives clearly indicated a wide space for independent decision-making. None of the school managers or the heads of the charities that ran them formally 'acted on behalf of' Hamas. They represented only their own institutions. Furthermore, as far as Hamas's political ideology is concerned, it is noteworthy that both private and public schools in Gaza operate according to the national curriculum, which is remarkably silent on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Brown 2002) – and even in Gaza, teachers and parents interviewed about their choice of schools did not mention political ideology at all. They were concerned with educational quality, the charity aspects and social norms instead.

4.2 Islamist ideology and Islamic schools

To what extent are Islamic schools part and parcel of the Islamist movement? This question has to be answered on two different levels. First, we will compare them to local Islamism, i.e. the ideology and practice of Hamas. Hamas is a specific, (relatively) coherent organisation with clear political goals stated in its charter from 1987 and in subsequent statements by its leaders over the years. There is a widespread assumption that Islamic schools are an integrated part of Hamas, serving its political aims, and this assumption should be questioned on the basis of empirical evidence. Secondly, Islamism is more than Hamas, which arose in the context of Israeli occupation. We will also compare the Islamic schools to the general description of Islamism provided in section 1.1. In this picture, values and world views take the place of shorter-range political goals.

Islamic schools and Hamas

According to its charter, Hamas has the dual aim of creating an Islamic state governed by shari'a and taking back the Palestinian 'homeland' from Israel (Mishal and Sela 2006: 181). The charter also mentions education, stating that Hamas aims to give young people an Islamic education in order to guide their thinking and faith and in order for them to know their enemy so that they may fight it (ibid. 186). On the basis of such statements and the extensive social activities associated with Hamas, Jeroen Gunning writes that Hamas has an explicit programme of socialising people into willing the Islamic state by way of proselytising (da'wah), and that its charities, kindergartens and schools are part of this programme (Gunning 2008: 85).

Let us measure up these statements and claims against four aspects of Islamic schools: teaching, the extracurricular activities, the self-understanding of managers and teachers, and written material produced by the schools, such as brochures and school magazines.

As has already been mentioned, the Islamic schools follow the national Palestinian curriculum. The textbooks in this curriculum emphasise the importance of international cooperation and solidarity (sixth grade, pp. 45–60), as well as religious and political pluralism and tolerance (*tarbiya madaniya*, ninth grade, pp. 9–11). Notions of an exclusive Islamic social order with its own unique values and standards are thus not taught in Islamic schools. Furthermore, the textbooks encourage students to contribute and add to the existing social and political system, not to change it. There is no indication that teachers in Islamic schools contradict the textbooks. In the classes we observed, the curriculum was followed to the letter, and the MoEHE's inspectors regularly visit both private and public schools to ensure that national standards are applied. In Gaza, where these inspectors are subject to the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Education, students still undergo exactly the same exams as their West Bank counterparts at the end of the twelfth term, and this is a way of ensuring that the same content is taught in Gaza and the West Bank.

The extracurricular activities consist of additional lessons in Islam/the Qur'ān and English as well as a number of cultural and sporting activities, such as reading circles and football. The extra Islam/Qur'ān lessons in particular set the Islamic schools apart from others. However, there is nothing to suggest that these lessons are particularly indoctrinating or subversive. In most schools, they are devoted to learning more parts of the Qur'ān than are allowed for in the national curriculum. Insofar as 'Islamic' morality or behaviour is taught, it does not seem to carry any political connotations. The cultural and sporting activities actually contribute to the integration of the Islamic schools into the national system of education, since the students meet with and compete against students from other schools through such activities.

As for the comments made by teachers about their work and motives, they hardly support the idea that they partake in a political project. When stating that they wish to inculcate students with Islamic values, they did not present it as a transformative project. Instead, they would emphasise that they built on and supported an *existing* set of norms and values that parents in the different cities and towns wanted their children to learn and abide by (cf. section 3.4). Rather than trying to make students Islamists, then, teachers in Islamic schools put special emphasis on values and ideas that are already current among large segments of the population.

The written material produced in and by the schools gives a good indication of the aims and ideology underlying their work. Brochures about the schools are ways of presenting it to the local population, while school magazines are the creative product of the students and the impulses they have received at school. The magazine *Qalam*

(Pen), which is produced yearly by students and staff at an Islamic school in Ramallah, is a good example of the latter. Consisting of some sixty-three pages of text and pictures, the magazine offers a wide variety of information and creative works by the students. The texts range from poems and a short story, through a recipe for invisible ink, to injunctions to be more pious in daily life ('why is it so hard to talk about Allah but yet so easy to talk about nasty stuff?'). The themes of resistance, occupation and Jerusalem also figure more than once, and the contributions by the students are framed by the headmistress's introduction and a list of the activities carried out in the school during the academic year 2007–8.

Considering that the school calls itself Islamic, perhaps the most striking feature of this booklet is the scarcity of overt religious language and ideas. The headmistress's introduction is completely free of overt religious references, apart from the page header, which reads 'In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate'. Her focus is on the students' achievements and creative talents, and she also devotes some space to writing about the importance of reading books, stating that the school has encouraged the students to read regularly in order to make reading a natural part of daily life. Among the other substantive pieces of text are a poem about resistance and a short story about Jerusalem. They are notable more for their nationalist sentiment than any religious fervour; indeed, both are characterised by sentimentality rather than aggressiveness.

In general, the texts contained in the magazine are very varied, ranging from the trivial to the profound. Except for some moral injunctions and the occasional reference to a hadith or a verse from the Qur'ān, there is nothing particularly religious about them. They reflect classroom activities and an atmosphere that can be found in any primary or secondary school. The report from the students' council about its activities is particularly interesting. It has organised swimming lessons and music lessons and has set up theatrical pieces to celebrate teachers' day. It also organised a 'health week' during which students could have their eyes and blood examined and learnt about the body and there was a special emphasis on healthy food and nutrition. The council had a similar theme on global poverty, with special emphasis on Palestine, and engaged in charitable work for the poor and orphans. Nowhere does the report mention specifically religious activities such as Qur'ān study groups or prayer sessions. This does of course not mean that there was no such activity, but the fact that it is not mentioned specifically in a report meant for internal consumption nevertheless says something about which activities are deemed to be central and which are not.

The brochures that advertise the different schools are also free of political allusions or a clear religious ideology, apart from references to God's grace and help. For example, in a glossy brochure for the school year 2009–10, the director of an Islamic association in Nablus that runs three schools writes that these schools 'will seek to become even more excellent in order to help the students realise their goals in the service of their precious nation [umma] and homeland [watan]'. In the short descriptions of the schools,

there is no reference to Islam. The focus is on the academic excellence of the schools (with detailed accounts of their attainments in the previous year), their facilities and computer equipment, and their follow-up of every student, in close cooperation with the home. In a similar vein, the brochure of an Islamic association in Jenin highlights its extra lessons in English, its school buses and the fact that it is free of charge for the poor and orphans. The fact that it also includes an extra subject called 'Islamic culture' is mentioned after both English and computer classes. Its stated aim is not to provide an alternative form of education, but to emend the poor availability and quality of existing public services in the Municipality of Jenin. Religious idealism in the service of development seems to be the idea, and not the other way around.

Summing up all these aspects of the Islamic schools, it is reasonable to say that they reflect Hamas's aim to guide young people's thinking and faith. It should be kept in mind, though, that although the schools agree with Hamas's goal for education, this goal is shared by many devout Muslims apart from Hamas activists. Actually, since the schools are dependent on attracting paying students in order to keep afloat financially, they must to a great extent reflect the existing norms and ideas among ordinary Palestinians. This precludes a transformative agenda and explains the emphasis on good behaviour and safety, as well as the lack of an activist religious bent in these schools. Even more importantly in relation to Hamas specifically, the political part of the charter's section on education, about 'knowing one's enemy', is not reflected in the schools. Nor is a programme of educating people into 'willing an Islamic state', if this means overturning the existing, secular political system in the Palestinian Territories. In short, in terms of ideology, these schools have only a tenuous relationship with the ideology articulated by Hamas.

Islamic schools and the Islamic Trend

What, then, about the relation of the Islamic schools to the Islamic Trend – to Islamism in a wide sense? Can they be regarded as manifestations of this trend, according to the description we presented in section 1.1?

The answer is a qualified yes. The Islamic schools do not seem to partake in, let alone propagate, a political project aimed at creating an Islamic state. Nor, on the face of the evidence gathered for this report, do they influence their students in order to make them engage in a religio-political struggle against the Israeli occupation. However, the cultural aspects of Islamism are reflected in the ethos that pervades the schools. As has been mentioned, Gaza is a stricter society than the West Bank. However, such differences notwithstanding, all the Islamic schools share the view that Islam and its scriptures constitute the platform on which to build the rest of the education. The Qur'ān and Sunnah have a *practical* value in addition to a spiritual one; understanding them is the key to understanding the rest of the world. As one father in Gaza put it:

> It is very important for me that my children learn the Holy Qur'ān and Sunnah. Memorising the Holy Qur'ān will help the student understand the rest of the subjects.[27]

Learning about and memorising the Qur'ān and Sunnah is supposed to instil positive values in the student and prevent bad habits from developing. There is a close relationship between the extra lessons given in Islamic subjects and the strong concern with social and moral norms among teachers and administrators. A particularly explicit example of this link is found in one school in Jenin, which has named its extracurricular Islam classes 'Islamic culture' rather than using the more common 'Qur'ān' label. The head of the *zakat* committee that runs the school commented on the school's focus on 'Islamic' values:

> In our school, students are taught how and what to pray in different situations: going to the toilet in the morning, before eating, and so on. And they are taught how to speak politely. [...] Non-religious schools might produce homosexuals. Homosexuality is a problem in several non-Islamic communities. But in a proper Islamic community there are no homosexuals, and the school contributes to creating such a community.[28]

In other words, the Islamic schools are engaged in a social and cultural struggle against perceived un-Islamic, foreign and threatening values. The 'West' lurks in the background, since sexual promiscuity and homosexuality are seen by Islamists as products of a morally corrupt Western society. A proper focus on religion, through instruction in the Qur'ān and Sunnah, is thought to make students immune from such cultural and moral dangers. This idea is clearly an Islamist one, highlighting religion as the safeguard of a morally superior identity. It is worth noting here, though, that the same official openly expressed his negative attitude toward Hamas. Shared ideas are not a guarantee of mutual sympathy among Muslim religious activists.

The case of Islamic schools can be compared to some of the key conclusions made in the only comprehensive study of Islamism and higher education of which we are aware. In his book about the Islamic grass-roots movement in Gaza, Michael Irving Jensen devotes considerable attention to the connections between Islamist ideology and higher education, using the Islamic University as his case (Jensen 2009). The Islamic University in Gaza was associated first with Ahmad Yasin's *al-Mujamma' al-Islami* (from 1983 onward) and, from 1987, with Hamas (Mishal and Sela 2006: 23-25). Irving Jensen shows that both ideology and social needs determine its function in Gaza. His main argument is that the university contributes to the Islamist aim of creating

[27] Interview in Gaza, 12 November 2009

[28] Interview in Jenin, 16 November 2009

'sound Muslims' (op. cit. 5). This entails inculcation of a number of values and opinions associated with Islamism. For example, there is a very telling example of how Islamist attitudes influence teaching from the English classes at the university. A professor makes his students read and comment on a children's poem about some nasty cats who intimidate the people in a neighbourhood (without the professor's informing them that it is a children's poem, meant to be funny). During the discussion of the poem, the cats are taken to represent the evil Jews, or the imperialist West. The professor concludes that the poem is about the failure of Western capitalism, the cats being the losers who turn to crime to fulfil their needs – something that would not have occurred in an Islamic society. As Jensen comments: 'A spirit of community revolving around Islam was being built up' (ibid. 117). He further states that teaching 'consisted principally in raising students' awareness of the differences between the Islamic world and the West' (ibid. 112). In other words, teaching contributed to a strengthening of the polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims, between East and West. On the other hand, one of Jensen's main aims was to study the motives of the young people who had chosen to study at the Islamic university, and the results here were less clear-cut. Their main reasons for choosing the Islamic university had to do with academic quality, scholastic discipline and moral standards, especially when it came to relations between girls and boys. In few cases was there anything consciously 'Islamist' about them.

The parallels to Islamic schools are obvious. They have varying degrees of affiliation with Hamas (the Islamic University is quite close to the organisation and can be compared to al-Salah schools in this respect); however, their teaching does not amount to political propaganda. Instead, their aim is to create 'sound Muslims', as Irving Jensen phrases it. Part of this endeavour is to nurture a communitarian religious identity that is juxtaposed with perceived deficiencies in Western societies, and this practice can be seen both in the Islamic schools and in the Islamic University in Gaza.

The last point to be made in this section is that, to some extent, the Islamic schools also seem to corroborate a very different, and less widespread, hypothesis about Islamist ideology, namely, its *modernising* force. While the focus in research on Islamism is mostly on violence, social conservatism and political authoritarianism, some research has approached the phenomenon from a quite different angle. Writing about the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, Bjørn Olav Utvik states that important elements of contemporary Islamism contribute to a 'pious' modernisation. These elements include an emphasis on economic and technical development; the individual and his/her personal responsibility in economic and political affairs; work as a sacred duty; education for all, and a struggle to end corruption and institute meritocracy instead (Utvik 2003).

There are aspects of the Islamic schools that clearly correspond with these points. For example, they all include extra English lessons. The reason given for this was that, among other things, better knowledge of English would enable students to go to the Gulf and earn money to send home. The schools also attend closely to the needs and

duties of individual students, encouraging them to work hard and participate in extracurricular activities. They clearly nurture a sense of individual responsibility. As for the teachers, they enjoy more opportunities to be creative and take personal initiative than in the public school system, and they feel that there is less corruption and network dependency in the private Islamic schools than in public ones. Finally, we need to include an episode from a class about 'the family' in an Islamic girls' school in Ramallah that illustrates the complex realities of the Islamic Trend. The teacher started the discussion about family structures and values by asking students to define what a family was. Guided by the teacher, they discussed the transition in Palestine from traditional large families to small nuclear families. The conclusion was that small families are better since they are not governed by a patriarch; there is more freedom, and mothers can work, thus helping to raise the standard of living in the family. The teacher then started discussing what she called 'paternal authority' (*al-sulta al-abawiya*), which she regarded as a defining characteristic of Arab families. She clearly stated that it was a negative phenomenon, because it does not allow other family members to take part in decisions or make their own way. These are hardly traditional or socially conservative messages, and the example shows that although the Islamic Trend is generally value-conservative, the picture is by no means black and white. On the contrary, such practices strengthen the hypothesis that Islamism is a modernising force.

4.3 Conclusion

Studies of Islamism in the Palestinian Territories are concerned chiefly with the ideology and politics of Hamas. For the most part, they treat Islamic social activism rather summarily, being content to assert that the various Islamic social institutions are parts and even instruments of the political movement. Consequently, various religious activities are labelled 'Hamas' activities, and they assume a clear political edge.

If we adopt a grass-roots perspective, however, the picture becomes more complex. Jensen concludes about the Hamas-affiliated Islamic University in Gaza that its main aim is to create 'sound Muslims' (Jensen 2009: 58). Rather than treating Islamic social institutions as instruments in the service of Hamas, Jensen thinks that 'Hamas and the Islamic organisations function as a common framework' (ibid. 57). Sarah Roy and Lars Gunnar Lundblad go further in distinguishing between Hamas and Islamic social institutions in their studies on Gaza and West Bank social activism, respectively. Roy states (2007: 187):

> The Islamic social movement in Gaza long preceded its political counterpart and will, in all likelihood, long outlive it. Seen in this way, Islamic social institutions are

the spinal cord of the Islamic movement; they sustain their political counterparts and not the other way around.

Lundblad asserts that 'in Palestine the Islamic social institutions have been one of the corner stones in the public welfare provisions since their prudent start in the 1920s' (Lundblad 2008: 204). The results of this study support the nuances and dissociations that Lundblad and Roy suggest. The Islamic schools were conceived as religiously conditioned answers to a difficult educational situation, as a means to strengthen civil society. They are local initiatives linked to local charities, and they function in part independently of any overarching organisational framework or mother movement.

However, this assertion does not deny the fact that in many cases the charities that run schools have been appropriated by Hamas, and that in some cases, they were actually established by the organisation. Moreover, several of the activists on such boards may have Hamas sympathies. Nevertheless, the main impression remains that the schools, and the charities that run them, are meant to provide welfare services to their local communities, not to propagate Hamas's ideology or political agenda.

In short: Islamic social activism has a long history and will continue to exist, in large part independently of the political fortunes of Islamism; Hamas's history is shorter and the organisation may decline. The two must be analytically separated, although links between them exist.

When measured against the wider Islamic Trend, the Islamic schools are easier to subsume under the general heading of Islamism. However, there is no hand-in-glove relationship between the traditional tenets of Islamism and the practices in Islamic schools. The people who run the schools, and the parents who send their children to them, simply do not seem very concerned with the question of ideology and the idea that there might be a grander scheme within which these schools function.

5 Internal and external pressures on Islamic schools: Hamas, Fatah and the international 'war on terrorism'

Despite their self-conscious avoidance of politics, the Islamic schools are a contested feature of contemporary Palestinian society. They have, as it were, become politically relevant against their own will. They are subject to two different kinds of pressure that have both had a damaging impact on them recently. The one kind of pressure is internal and has to do with the bitter struggle between Fatah and Hamas for political control over the Palestinian Territories. The other is external and has to do with the spectre of 'Islamic terrorism', which has been haunting international politics since 2001.

5.1 Internal pressures

The violent conflict between Hamas and Fatah that followed in the wake of the former's surprise election victory in 2006 caused severe problems for Islamic charity organisations in the West Bank. Following Hamas's violent takeover of power in Gaza in 2007, Fatah embarked on a campaign to eliminate Hamas as a political and social actor in the West Bank. Islamic charity institutions such as *zakat* committees were regarded as tools for Hamas, and several of their board members were known to sympathise with the organisation. Consequently, Fatah cracked down on these institutions and sought to gain control over them. During interviews with activists and observers, it was made clear that the measures taken by Fatah have had two main consequences. Firstly, many institutions were subjected to strong pressure and harassment by security forces. The offices of NGOs regarded as Islamic have been raided on several occasions. One activist in an Islamic consultancy organisation specialising in questions of democracy and transparency had his office raided and all his computer equipment confiscated. The security officer who confiscated the equipment later invited him to buy it back, presumably keeping the profit for himself.[29] Similar raids have taken place against organisations that run Islamic schools and orphanages, either by the Israeli Army (with

[29] Interview in Nablus, 16 November 2009

the tacit approval of Fatah) or by Fatah forces.[30] Less violent forms of pressure have also been employed by Fatah. The officials in one relatively big charity in Hebron reported that they had been subjected to pressure from the PA when hiring teachers for their schools. If the PA did not like the people in question, it would force the charity to hire other people, less offensive to the authorities. The officials also mentioned that less well-connected charities in the Hebron area had been subjected to much harsher pressure and harassment.[31] Intimidation and persecution of individuals have also been reported. The headmaster of one Islamic school in Nablus was sacked by the PA during the fieldwork for this report. Both the charity that runs the school and the headmaster operated with transparency and were obviously efficient and successful, making it hard to imagine that the reason for his departure could be anything but political. In the Hebron area, the Palestinian journalist and intellectual Khalid Amayreh reports, one headmaster of an Islamic school was arrested and 'savagely' beaten in 2009, for no apparent reason.[32]

Secondly, the PA has introduced changes to the charities, of a more systemic nature, which threaten their legitimacy and economic situation. Across the West Bank, the PA has since 2006 summarily dismissed the members of charity organisation boards or caused them to resign, replacing them with new ones. According to observers, the reason for this policy is that members of charity boards have been regarded as pro-Hamas. By replacing them with people they feel they can trust, the authorities in the West Bank try to gain control over the Islamic social institutions, which are popular among Palestinians. However, such heavy-handed tactics have led grass-roots activists and employees in the charities (teachers, headmasters, administrators) to feel threatened and insecure, at the same time as trust in these charities among the populace has decreased. The latter tendency has led to a loss in local fundraising. Such economic problems are exacerbated because of the so-called 'war on terror', which we return to below. We have not been able to ascertain the exact loss in income for the different charities, but several school administrators across the West Bank mentioned that times had been rather hard lately, and that they struggled to keep afloat financially. Two very concrete indicators of this are that fees for non-orphans in Islamic schools have risen sharply over the last two years and that some teachers reported that salaries in private schools were low, or that they had recently decreased.

[30] See 'Israeli troops raid orphanage, shut down sewing workshop in Hebron', Ma'an News Agency, 30 April 2008 (http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=202314)

[31] Interview in Hebron, 18 November 2009

[32] Interview in al-Dura, 8 September 2009

5.2 External pressures

Several studies have already noted the difficult situation facing Islamic charities as a result of the international 'war on terrorism' (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009, ICG 2003). The freezing of assets, tight monitoring of money flows, and court cases against international charities have made it considerably harder for local charities in the Middle East to raise money for their activities. Especially in the USA, the threshold for branding Islamic charities as Hamas-affiliated has been, and is, very low. For some organisations, this has meant shutdowns and court cases (the Holy Land Foundation is one case in point); for others, it has meant intimidation from local Middle Eastern authorities eager to show the West that they are doing their bit in the struggle against international terrorism.

There is little doubt that the measures taken by the USA and other authorities have made it harder for Hamas to fund and sustain militant, violent activities. However, it is also clear that the sanctions have had an effect on peaceful activities as well, including Islamic private schools. Most of the schools we visited were dependent to a lesser or greater extent on regional and international charities in addition to local funding. Owing to increased surveillance of Islamic charity and the suspicion that such charity is often a cover for terrorism, donors have become nervous. The head of a charitable association in Jenin stated that even small transactions and decisions are subject to the approval of a central controller in the PA. They have a 'very tight policy', according to him. Everybody who gives money to a *zakat* committee must now register his or her name and this deters people from donating money. They are afraid of being reported to foreign intelligence agencies and being denied entry to the USA because they have supported Islamic charities. This is not only the case for local donors; regional and international Islamic charities are also targeted. The Palestinian charities we visited were often hesitant to name the specific organisations from which they received economic support. Instead, they generalised, citing the Gulf countries and European Muslim organisations as important sources of funding. This cautious attitude is arguably a result of the fact that Gulf donors, traditionally very important sources of funding for Palestinian Islamic charities, have become nervous about giving money to organisations that might be construed to belong to Hamas. The head of the *zakat* committee in Jenin claimed that more money now went under the table, and that, as a result, the economy of Islamic charities is less transparent than it used to be. Ultimately, in his opinion, such measures 'are benefitting Hamas', since Hamas is used to receiving secret funds and putting them into circulation in society. They are, however, clearly not benefitting West Bank Islamic charities that operate independently and under the close scrutiny of the PA, Israeli and US authorities alike.

Lastly, the difficulties that arise because of Israeli occupation policies should be mentioned, since these are one kind of external pressure. As mentioned, in the West

Bank, Israeli forces have entered cities and towns such as Hebron to carry out raids on Islamic charities. Such events seemed not to be a central concern for the activists we interviewed; most of them cited the Fatah-Hamas struggle and international sanctions against Islamic charities as the main problems. However, locally, Israeli policies can at times have a great impact. In Jenin, where there is only one Islamic school and a poorly developed public infrastructure, the *zakat* committee had experienced a dramatic decrease in income from local funding in recent years. The reason was Israel's closure of the border between the northern part of the West Bank and the Galilee area. As long as the border was open, Palestinians from Jenin would make a lot of money trading with Israeli citizens who came to the West Bank to shop in order to save money. When Israel closed the border because of its security concerns, this source of income disappeared. This reportedly had the consequence that the Islamic school had to raise its fees and cut the number of students by about 300.

In Gaza, Israeli policies have of course had a more dramatic impact, not least during the war against Gaza in January 2009. The schools we were able to visit did not report physical damage to the school buildings as a result of the Israeli invasion. However, the students were traumatised in many cases, and the blockade made it difficult to acquire such basic equipment as stationery and textbooks.[33] Public schools and other private schools in Gaza probably experience the same problems, but that is of little consolation to the administrators and students in the Islamic private schools.

5.3 Conclusion

The struggle between Fatah and Hamas for political power, the US-led crackdown on Islamic charities, and, to a lesser extent, Israeli policies, present serious difficulties for charities that run Islamic schools. The effects of the Fatah-Hamas struggle and the international crackdown on Islamic charities are most strongly felt in the West Bank. The charities are viewed with suspicion by Fatah, since their activists are often seen to sympathise with Hamas. Accordingly, they face takeover attempts, meddling in internal affairs, and outright harassment. The economic measures taken by the international community against Islamic charities and the attendant close monitoring of their activities have led to serious economic problems. These are probably also felt most strongly in the West Bank, since West Bank charities are under close scrutiny from the PA. However, in Gaza, the whole school system suffers because of the 2009 war and the Israeli-Egyptian blockade in force that has been in force since 2007.

[33] Interview with headmaster of Islamic boys' school in Dayr al-Balah, 6 September 2009

The measures taken against Palestinian charities, including ones that run primary and secondary schools, present them with great practical and economic difficulties, in some cases amounting to a slow strangulation of these institutions. This would perhaps be no great cause for concern if the idea were correct that all Islamic charities were part of the 'terrorist infrastructure' of Hamas, their main function being to prop up violent Islamist activism. However, the evidence gathered in the fieldwork for this report does not support that idea. Both in the West Bank and Gaza, Islamic charities and schools existed before Hamas appeared as a political force in Palestinian society. The idea that the Islamic schools are there to serve the local community and retain a sense of Islamic identity is prominent both in interviews and in texts written by activists. In other words, the schools are not generally seen to be part of a political project by the people associated with them. This seems to be true not only in the West Bank, where most charities are cut off from the Hamas economic and social infrastructure anyway, but also in Gaza, in spite of the fact that Hamas probably helps fund some of the schools there. Small-scale, non-political ideas about community building, entrepreneurship and religious identity are the motivation for the providers of Islamic schools, not an urge to create an Islamic state and wipe Israel off the map.

6 Conclusion

Three main issues have been addressed in this report: the extent and nature of Islamic private schools; their role in the Palestinian education system, and their role in the Islamic movement as part of this movement's social and political activism. Below, we restate the conclusions we have arrived at and connect them to the current political and economic difficulties facing these schools.

Islamic private schools constitute a small but by no means negligible part of the Palestinian education system, catering to thousands of families all over the Palestinian Territories. Seen from the vantage point of educators, these schools fulfil two practical functions in the social and educational system in Palestine. Firstly, they provide better education and opportunities for orphans and other vulnerable social groups than these would otherwise get. Secondly, they help relieve the public sector's capacity problems, ensuring that a sizeable number of Palestinian children get an above-average education. Measured against the Palestinian Ministry of Education's goals from its second five-year plan (MoEHE 2008), the Islamic schools help to achieve two of the three main goals: access to education and improved quality of education.

These schools are for the most part charitable, i.e. they are non-profit organisations that especially attend to orphans and the poor by giving them scholarships so they get a good education for free. Most of the students, however, are from middle-class Palestinian families who prefer the private Islamic schools to public schools, in spite of the fees they have to pay.

Why, then, do these families prefer the Islamic schools, and why were they established in the first place? This brings us to their position within Islamism. In many cases, the history of these schools can be traced back to the 1980s – sometimes even farther back. They were not part of any political project. Instead, they are the product of a religious impulse that is translated into charitable work built on an Islamic ethos. The people involved in charities that run Islamic schools want to serve their local communities as an act of piety. Accordingly, they especially care for orphans, a group that has traditionally enjoyed special protection throughout Islamic history. In addition, they want religion to have a more comprehensive role in society. This is why an Islamic ethos suffuses these schools. It is enunciated not through political agitation of any sort, but through focus on morals, discipline and quality, as well as more teaching of the Qur'ān than in public schools.

As local initiatives linked to local charities, the Islamic schools often have no direct affiliation with Hamas, nor is there any evidence that they seek to further Hamas's political ideology or its methods. However, they do form part of Islamism in a wider sense, as a general outlook on life and the organisation of the social sphere. The Islamic schools see themselves as engaged in a social and cultural struggle against perceived un-Islamic, foreign and threatening values. In their view, a proper focus on religion through instruction in the Qur'ān and Sunnah makes students immune from such cultural and moral dangers. Hamas and the Islamic charities thus belong in the wide circle that we can term Islamism, the Islamic movement, or the Islamic Trend. Within this circle, however, it is also possible to draw a smaller one that includes Hamas and other political organisations but not necessarily Islamic schools, hospitals, study centres or the like. It is only logical for Hamas to try to appropriate these projects, since they enjoy credibility and the respect of most Palestinians. It is also unsurprising that several activists in these charities are sympathetic to Hamas. However, one cannot automatically claim that they are therefore part of the Hamas apparatus.

The Islamic private schools seem in fact to be part of the attempt at building a viable civil society. They offer non-governmental services in a field where such services are much needed, and they make a point of contributing positively to their local communities. More often than a given school is part of a charity that also provide other services and meeting places in Palestinian cities and towns. Palestinians are known for their efforts in building a civil society under difficult conditions (Kimmerling and Migdal 2003: 353?). A viable civil society is particularly important in a situation where no fully fledged government or central authority exists. In the specific area of schooling, it is acknowledged by both outside actors and Palestinian officials themselves that there are great challenges to overcome. The Islamic schools are seen by Palestinian educators to be a positive contribution to the school system as a whole, and activists, students and parents in Islamic schools all clearly benefit from their existence.

In spite of their lack of a political agenda, the schools and the charities that run them face great political and economic problems. Internally, they have become tools in a power struggle between Hamas and Fatah. The international measures against terrorism since 2001 have been even more damaging. The end result of these pressures is that charities lose their sources of funding and experience tight control of their activities, sometimes even direct and violent interference in them.

There is reason to believe that the antiterrorism measures currently in place may ironically result in the opposite effect to that intended. As a charity administrator in Jenin commented, funding for Islamic charities has not disappeared since the new legislation came into force; it has gone underground. The charities that work independently, such as the majority of the charities in this report, lose income as a result, but economic support for Hamas continues in secret. It is well known that the organisation receives money through Iran, Syria, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as from Europe

and the USA (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009: 106). Some of this money is then transferred to charities directly affiliated with Hamas. While an unknown percentage of this money was previously channelled into more independent charities, especially in the West Bank, they have now lost that support, to the benefit of Hamas-affiliated ones. In a twisted way, then, the claim that all Islamic charities are connected to Hamas becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as counterterrorism measures based on that claim damage the independent Islamic charities in Palestine.

In a recent book about Islamic charities, Jonathan Benthall cautions (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009: 107):

> Rather than merely note the permeability of charity and politics in the Middle East, we should also ask how intellectually and practically sustainable is the sharp distinction between the two that the Euro-American law of charities strives so hard to enforce.

The conclusions arrived at in this report suggest that, in the case of Palestinian charities, the attempt to retain a sharp divide between charity and politics has proven damaging to an activity that positively contributes to building a viable Palestinian civil society. In the Palestinian context, at least, the Euro-American black-and-white approach to Islamic activism should be replaced by the (more demanding) policy of gaining intimate knowledge of the local political conditions and individual Islamic charities before adopting any specific policy toward them. From this perspective, the Islamic schools gain importance as more than educational institutions: their case is symptomatic of difficulties affecting the whole system of Islamic charities in the West Bank and Gaza.

Appendix: Two case studies from Gaza and the West Bank

Dar al-Arqam Educational Association[34]

The Dar al-Arqam Educational Association was established in 2000 by Ahmad Yasin, the late spiritual leader of Hamas. It is thus one of the charitable associations that have a direct affiliation with Hamas. Dar al-Arqam runs two schools for boys and two for girls. They are all situated in and around Gaza City. In contrast to some of the older charitable associations in Gaza, like al-Salah (established in 1978), Dar al-Arqam does not provide other kinds of welfare apart from education. Its funding comes from charities in the Arab World and abroad, and there is also some local funding by way of *sadaqa*, religious donations outside the *zakat* tax system. The chairman of the board of trustees, Muhammad Hassan Sham'a, particularly mentions the Qatari Shaykh 'Id bin Muhammad al-Thani Association[35] as a major funder. According to Sham'a, the most important aims of the Dar al-Arqam association are the following:

- To provide the students with knowledge of Islam on the basis of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah
- To foster students who carry out their obligations as set out by the precepts of Islam
- To produce an educated generation able to contribute to the cultural and industrial development of Palestinian society
- To create an environment that reflects an Islamic ideology, and to enable the students to understand the foundation of life, and to be useful to their religion, family, society, and nation
- To help the students know their own and others' rights – and duties, especially toward their religion and country
- To foster a generation of hope and victory

[34] Its website is at http://www.arqamschools.org/arqam/ar/?page=index

[35] See its website at http://www.eidcharity.net/internal.html

The student figures we were given varied somewhat, but from interviews with the head of board at the association and with principals at two different schools, it was clear that the total number of students is close to 3,000, distributed between the four schools. There are two systems for enrolling in the association's schools. Children whose parents can cover the expenses (such as the school fees, uniform, stationery and transportation) pay the fees, which range between 1,500 NIS and 2,100 NIS (300–400 EUR). The second system is for orphans, i.e. sons and daughters of martyrs and prisoners. The school prepares a file on each child and then sends it to the Dar al-Arqam association, requesting that the child be 'adopted'. If the school receives a positive answer, it can register the child, who is not required to pay any fees. In addition, uniforms, textbooks, stationery, transportation and other expenses are paid for by the association. About 1,000 students register in this way.

In addition to the national Palestinian curriculum, the schools offer 2–4 hours of Islamic education and English per week. The Islamic education consists of memorising as many parts of the Qur'ān as possible over twelve years. English is offered for developmental purposes, in order better to keep up with what happens abroad. The Dar al-Arqam schools are also known for their progressive profile, which includes the practice of having one computer for each student during computer classes, and the practice of using computers as a tool more and more in other subjects. Other facilities that characterise the schools are their modern science labs, mosques, libraries and canteens.

When asked about the advantages the Dar al-Arqam schools offered in comparison to other schools, the headmistress at one of the girls' schools emphasised the following points:

- Modern equipment and teaching tools, spaciousness and a nice building in a good location
- Professional staff, administration, experienced teachers, and supervisors
- A focus on moral values and Islamic teachings in addition to the official curriculum
- Extra classes for academically weak students in order to improve their marks
- Good cooperation between the schools and parents and between the schools and other local institutions
- A healthcare programme for all students

The chemistry lab at one of the Dar al-Arqam schools for girls (picture kindly provided by the *Dar al-Arqam association*)

Distribution of free school bags for orphans and the poor, Dar al-Arqam schools (*picture kindly provided by the Dar al-Arqam association*)

Young Men's Muslim Association, Hebron

Founded in 1985, the Young Men's Muslim Association (Jum'iyyat al-Shubban al-Muslimin) in Hebron originally owned two rooms in an office building and a small kindergarten. Now it has grown to become one of Hebron's major charities and administers a number of services, including four schools with a total of 1,500 students. One of the schools is mixed (grades 1–3); there are two schools for boys and one for girls.

The schools are all charitable in the sense that they were not established for profit. Of the students, 10–15 per cent are orphans who get tuition and equipment for free. The rest of the students each pay annual fees of about 500 EUR, including transport. Owing to the great popularity of the schools, the association owns twenty buses that transport students from all over the Hebron area to the schools. The administration of the charity informed us that, each year, they have to reject a number of applicants, since there is not enough capacity in the schools for all those who would like to go to them.

The association receives most of its funding from local sources. The general director stresses the close ties the association maintains with the local population. It is well known and trusted, and it wants first and foremost to be of service to the local community. The association includes a team whose job it is to do research in Hebron's neighbourhoods to find out which families need economic or other assistance. Its newest school was in large part financed by a grant from a local lady who had received help from the association long ago; after her sons grew up and proceeded to become successful businessmen, she bought a plot of land and donated it to the association. The family also paid for the construction of the school building.

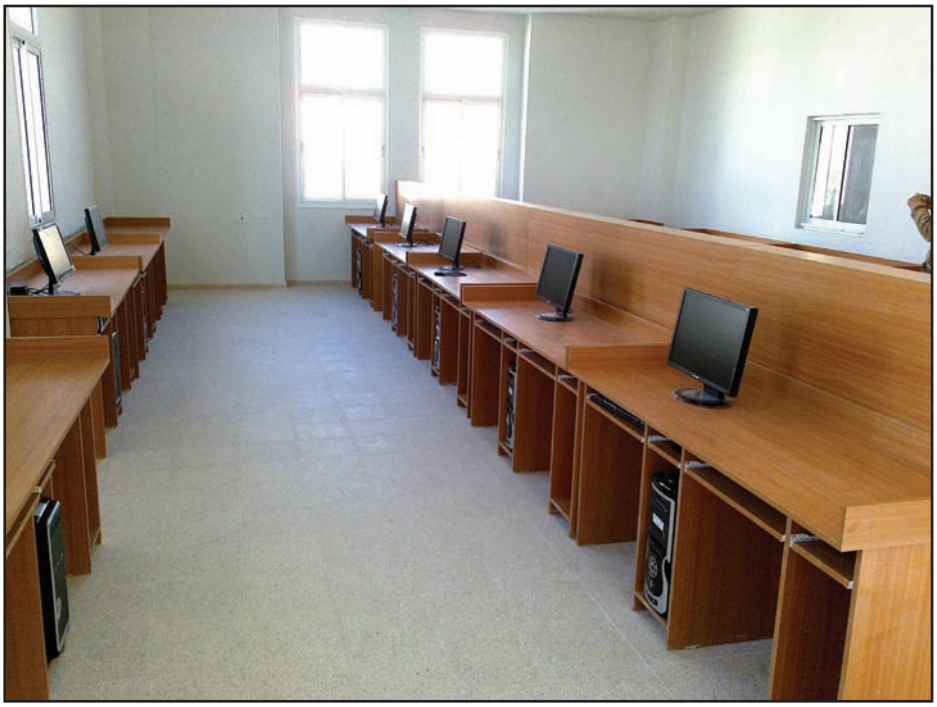
It is not surprising, therefore, that the association keeps expanding. In 2009 it opened its fourth school, which was not yet completely finished at the time of our visit in November. The associations' officials were eager to explain that the school had been carefully designed. It features a canteen and playground outside the school, rather than inside a central courtyard (which is normal in Palestinian schools), so as to reduce noise in the classrooms. There is a state-of-the-art computer lab donated by local businesspeople, and a large library in the top (third) floor. There are two spacious working rooms for the teachers, who are also given individual PCs to facilitate their work.

When we asked about the main differences between the association's schools and other schools in the area, the managers and teachers mentioned the following points:

- Only 25–30 students in each class, as compared to 35–50 in public schools
- Two hours of additional English instruction per week and one hour extra of computer education

- A focus on discipline, polite behaviour and a 'religious culture'. Prospective students and teachers are interviewed to see whether their personalities 'fit the schools'. However, as the headmistress of the girls' school put it, 'there is no religious screening – secular as well as religious students are allowed'.
- There is an internal inspector in addition to the MoEHE's inspector (who visits the schools regularly). This is to ensure high-quality teaching.

As for their own reasons for joining the association's schools, two headmasters expressed the feeling that there was more room for creativity and personal initiative in these than in public schools. One of them had thirty years' experience as a teacher and headmaster in a public school. All applicants for teaching positions are interviewed, and, lately, also screened by the MoEHE's officials. The officials in the association admitted some tension at times between their own priorities and those of the PA authorities, but stated that, in general, the operation of the schools and the contact with the PA ran smoothly. This might be due partly to the fact that they were very concerned not to appear as politically motivated at all. They also participate actively in a number of activities and contests organised by the PA on a national scale. They own a theatre (and produce their own plays – the latest was about King Solomon, in English), and we saw prizes from local and nationwide contests in chess, football, Qur'ān memorisation, handball and table tennis in the offices of the school managers.



The computer lab at Hajja Nazirah Abu Rumaylah school in *Hebron (*Photo: Jacob Høigilt)

The chemistry lab at Hajja Nazirah Abu Rumaylah school in *Hebron (*Photo: Jacob Høigilt)

List of Interviews

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Gaza Strip

Alia Shaheen, projects director of al-Salah association, 5 September 2009

Jum'a Asfa, headmaster of al-Salah Charitable School for Males, 6 September 2009

Fayza Muhammad Abu Shawarib, headmistress of al-Sayyida Khadija Charitable School for Orphan Female Students and the Daughters of Martyrs, 7 September 2009

Muhammad Hassan Sham'a, chairman of the board of trustees, Dar al-Arqam Educational Association, 8 September 2009

Mahmud Khalil al-Hilw, headmaster of Dar al-Arqam Elementary School, 9 September 2009

Wafa Jawdat Abu Sidu, headmistress of Dar al-Arqam Girls' School, 10 September 2009

Abu Islam, projects director of al-Mujamma' al-Islami, 2 November 2009

Hamdi Shubayr, director of al-Mujamma' al-Islami in Khan Yunis, 2 November 2009

Abu Muhammad, director of Dar al-Kitab wa'l-Sunnah in Khan Yunis, 5 November 2009

Yunus Duhayr, director of Imam al-Uthaymin School, 9 November 2009

West Bank

Headmaster and teachers at a primary school in Nablus, 11 May 2009

Deputy headmaster at a secondary school for boys in Nablus, 11 May 2009 and 9 September 2009

Headmistress and deputy headmistress at a primary and secondary school for girls in the Ramallah area, 13 May 2009 and 10 September 2009

Jamil Ishtayyi, foreign relations official, Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Ramallah, 13 May and 10 September 2009

Khalid Amayreh, journalist and commentator, al-Dura, 8 September 2009

Headmaster and director of two (single-sex) primary and secondary schools for boys and girls in the Ramallah area, 10 September 2009

Signe Marie Breivik at the Norwegian Representative Office in al-Ram, 11 September 2009

Director of a charity organisation in Jenin, 16 November 2009

Deputy director of a primary school in Jenin, 16 November 2009

Director of a competence-building NGO in Nablus, 16 November 2009

Su'ad al-Qaddoumi, deputy director general, general education, Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Ramallah, 17 November 2009

Five officials and headmasters in a charity organisation that runs four schools in Hebron, 18 November 2009

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Raising Extremists?

Schools run by Islamic charities are often seen as carriers of militant Islamic ideology and as sites for the recruitment of terrorists. Based on empirical studies of Islamic schools in the West Bank and Gaza, this report argues that such a view is mistaken in the case of Palestinian society. Islamic private schools are eager to assert the role of Islam in developing Palestinian society, but there is nothing dramatic or sinister about this. In fact, the schools may be seen as important contributions to building a viable civil society in Palestine. However, the struggle between Fatah and Hamas for political power, and international counterterrorism measures has seriously affected a number of Islamic charities and the schools they run. The result is economic problems and a weakening of these institutions in Palestinian society.

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