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Israel and Palestine, Hamas and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades

Introduction

In the early 2000s during the Second Intifada, awful scenes in the aftermath of suicide bombings of strewn body parts being collected outside pizzerias and nightclubs in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem became synonymous with Hamas in Western news reports. However during this period the frequency of militant attacks and lethality was matched, and at times surpassed, by the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Notably both groups explicitly targeted Israeli civilians and carried out high levels of ACV, unlike the IRA in Northern Ireland which was more constrained. However, in common with the IRA, their attacks were carried out in a situation of contentious politics and were in interaction with the political structures, the mobilising structures and cultural framing of the time. Analysis of the data compiled for the databases showed two distinct escalations, termed Wave One, from 1993–1997, and Wave Two, from 2000–2005. Wave One occurred while Hamas was outside of the political system during the Oslo Accord peace years, and Wave Two was the time period of the Second Intifada which saw exceptional levels of violence being carried out by both the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and the Palestinian militant groups, with utterly devastating results.

This chapter outlines the evolution of militancy in Israel and Palestine, and then carries out a structured focused comparison of the two waves by examining the political structures, mobilising structures and cultural framing used. It finds that the narrowing of political options to forward a purely political agenda, in Wave Two, combined with exceptionally high levels of support and social sanction amongst Palestinians led to the two nationalist militant groups carrying out very high levels of ACV. The lower levels of support, sanction and
resources in Wave One, as well as the existence of the peace accords and the formalisation of a political Palestinian system, constrained the resort to ACV at that time. By comparing the political structures, the mobilising structures and the cultural framing in this way we can ascertain if it corresponds to the model developed in Chapter 2 and the expected outcomes. By using a politically and historically contextualised approach it also ensures that the linkages, dynamics and structures are examined as part of a process rather than attempting to seek causation of isolated factors.

Background to militancy in Israel and Palestine

Essentially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about land (Makdisi, 2008: 13). It became contentious with the emergence of two nationalist groups claiming the same land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jewish and Palestinian respectively. But it did not just begin in 1948. Prior to the United Nations (UN) Partition Plan and the establishment of Israel in 1948, both Jewish and Palestinian Arab groups engaged in militantism, in opposition to the British Mandate. The British Mandate was part of the post-World War I carve up between the French, British and Russians, known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which made Britain the colonial master of Palestine (Rogan, 2009: 153). It was also ratified by the League of Nations in 1923.

The escalation in tensions regarding British rule and concerns over Jewish immigration among Palestinians led to numerous civil disturbances and riots, notably the Palestinian Arab revolt in the 1930s (Milton Edwards and Farrell, 2010). Additionally, Arab nationalists such as Sheikh Ezzedeen Al Qassam and his Palestinian Black Hand Gang carried out attacks against the British forces in Palestine, and against Jewish settlements and settlers. Jewish groups such as the Irgun and Stern Gang also played a very significant role. They launched attacks on the British governing forces, notably the King David Hotel (the centre of British administration) bombing in 1946, which killed over 90 people, mostly civilians. The cumulative effect of dealing with such attacks and disturbances, as well as the depletion of British resources and resolve because of World War II, led the British in February 1947 to announce their intention to hand over responsibility to the UN (Rogan, 2009: 250–251).

The birth of the state of Israel was determined by two factors: ‘the ideology of Zionism’ and ‘the desire for security’ following on from the discrimination and pogroms against Jews in Europe and Russia.