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‘RE-ISLAMISING’ PALESTINIAN SOCIETY ‘FROM BELOW’: HAMAS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN GAZA

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a contribution to the field of studies that explores how Islamist movements promote social and educational activities ‘from below’. It approaches the issue of Islamism and higher education through the efforts of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and its reformist educational activities at the Islamic University of Gaza, which is a major stronghold of the movement. The essay illustrates how the university defines and understands its role in Palestinian society. It offers empirical data and further insights into the ways in which young students respond to and absorb the leadership’s efforts to carry out what might be described as the ‘re-Islamisation’ processes of Palestinian society ‘from below’: the Islamic state in Palestine would be the result of a gradual, incremental process of ‘re-Islamisation’, to be achieved primarily by education and social action ‘from the bottom up’.

Introduction

Islamism as a political ideology is an anti-colonialist movement. It is part of what Burgat has termed the ‘rocket of de-colonisation’ (Burgat 2003: 49). In the wake of the secular nationalist, pan-Arabist and socialist inspired attempts at obtaining political and then economic independence the Islamists of today furthermore attempt to gain cultural autonomy. They attempt to rewrite history, and in doing so, they use what is being presented as an ‘authentic’ language, the language of Islam (Burgat 2003: 48–50).

A significant part of the moderate Islamists’ political strategy is to work

within the context of civil society as they seek to (re-) Islamise society 'from below'. Numerous Islamist movements, including the Palestinian Hamas, have established medical clinics, kindergartens, sports clubs, hospitals and schools. Hamas also controls a university: the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). Research on Islamism conducted so far often refers to the various social institutions as being of tremendous importance for the activities of the Islamists. While the majority of researchers within the field acknowledge and emphasise the importance of these institutions (Sahliyah 1995; Mishal and Sela 2000; Milton-Edwards 1996), an empirical documentation of how the Islamists carry out their social and educational activities has not yet been included.

The present article is a contribution to a new field of study that documents this important aspect of Islamism through fieldwork. The article is approaching the issue through the efforts of the Palestinian Islamists at the IUG, which is considered to be a major stronghold for the Islamist movement:

The Islamic University in Gaza, founded in 1978, is considered the principal Muslim Brotherhood stronghold. The University's administration, most of the employees who work there and the majority of the students are Brotherhood supporters (Abu Amr 1994: 17).

Throughout the 1990s Hamas held on to its control of the IUG, partly through free and fair democratic elections; in the student council elections of 1996-97 it won 75.5 per cent of the ballots cast versus 17.3 per cent for Fatah. It won massively again in the following year: 77.2 per cent, compared with 15.6 per cent for Fatah (Hroub: 2000: 219).¹

A case study of a major Islamist educational institution such as the IUG could illuminate how an Islamist movement uses what is thought of as their own language and history and 'local' culture, in order to regain what has been lost (i.e. their 'own' culture and history) and to reject Western hegemony. This article will deal exclusively with the activities unfolding at the IUG.

Despite the fact that numerous researchers dealing with Islamism in Palestine stress that this is the most important base for the Palestinian Islamists, no one has yet focused on how lectures and daily life unfold on campus. Based on extensive anthropological fieldwork carried out at the IUG this article examines how the Islamists by means of education are trying to increase the awareness of the students, and to enable them to cope with the ideological crisis unfolding not only in Palestine, but in the Arab Middle East as a whole. During the spring semester of 1998 I was

1. During the same period Hamas was also victorious in the Palestinian Engineering Union elections in Gaza, securing 65 per cent of the vote versus 35 per cent for Fatah (Hroub 2000: 219).

allowed by the administration of the IUG to carry out fieldwork for six months. I was enrolled as a student and followed classes at the Institute for English Studies, in American Literature and Literary Appreciation. Besides attending lectures – where I stenographed most of the lectures – 25 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with students, teachers and administrators. The material presented in this article is based on this fieldwork.²

The article will attempt to illustrate how the university defines and understands its role in society, as well as to offer empirical insights into the ways in which the young students respond to and absorb the leadership's efforts to carry out what may be seen as a process of Islamisation of society.

The article is divided into three main parts: First, an introduction to the history of the IUG presenting the official aims of the institution, i.e. at leadership level. This brief historical outline is given in order to anchor the empirical material in a historical context. The second part presents empirical material collected during fieldwork at the IUG. This material focuses on the process of 'learning Islamism', through the obligatory courses within the framework of '*Islamicum*' (see below). Additionally, the material provides documentation as to how the students perceive what they are being taught. Finally, additional material is supplied from classes in the English Department where the bulk of my fieldwork was conducted. Also in this section the views of the students will be presented.

The history and aims of the Islamic University of Gaza: A political plot

There are two universities in the Gaza Strip: the Islamic University (IUG), established in 1978, and al-Azhar University of Gaza, founded in 1992. (A third university was established in the early part of this century when the Teachers' College was turned into a university as well). These are the two largest universities in the Palestinian territories, with respectively 11,500 and 13,000 students in 2001. Al-Azhar University of Gaza was established on the initiative of the mainstream Fatah movement in the early 1990s, clearly as a counterweight to the IUG.

In the early 1970s a number of Palestinian intellectuals had repeatedly proposed that a university be established in the Gaza Strip, but nothing concrete came of the idea. It was not until 1978 that the project came to

2. The study deals only with men as all the interviews were conducted with male students. The IUG is gender segregated and as male researcher I did fieldwork in the male section. It would have been very interesting to be able to compare the views of female students, as they most likely would have held other views than those being presented here.

fruition with the establishment of the IUG. The university was developed on the basis of the existing 'al-Azhar Institute' (no relation to the Al-Azhar University of Gaza), which until that point had been one of the few higher educational institutions in Gaza. As its name indicates, the al-Azhar Institute was affiliated with al-Azhar University in Cairo. Students could obtain a diploma-level education, corresponding to two years of study beyond high school.

One of the main reasons why the idea of founding a university was finally put into practice in 1978 was that Egypt, after 1977, had begun to deny access to a large number of Palestinian students. Until then the majority of Gaza's educated young people had received their degrees in Egypt. The official reason was that a Palestinian group had been responsible for the murder of a prominent Egyptian intellectual. More significant, however, was Anwar Sadat's 'peace initiative', his visit to the Knesset in November 1977 and the negotiations and signing of the Camp David accords that followed in 1978-79. These events caused a rift between the PLO and the Egyptian government as the PLO, as well as the great majority of Palestinians opposed these moves. It was therefore the Egyptian decision to close the doors to Palestinian students which made it clear for Palestinian politicians that a Palestinian University in the Gaza Strip was needed (Milton-Edwards 1999; Mishal and Sela 2000). During its first two years (1978-80) the new university was housed in the buildings of the al-Azhar Institute, but in 1980 it moved to another site nearby. Initially there were only three faculties: Arabic language, *Usul al-Din* and *Shari'a*, the classic Islamic disciplines. However, the university soon realised a need for graduates to be capable of developing Palestinian society in more practical ways. Consequently, a number of more secular disciplines and faculties, such as nursing, engineering, journalism, English, business, accounting and so on, were established.

During 1980-86 the religious orientation of the university led to conflicts between Islamist and secular students. The power struggle, which took place on campus during this period, was more than just a struggle for control over the university as such. It was a reflection of the more general political power-struggle occurring in the Gaza Strip at the time. In the late 1970s the best-organised political group in Palestine was the Communists, who wielded considerable influence on a number of NGOs and other organisations. The Islamists, however, had also begun to organise themselves through the establishment of social institutions such as *Mujamma' Islami* and *Jam'iyya Islamiyya*, both related to the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and its leader at the time, Shaykh Ahmad Yasin. The largest organisation within the framework of the PLO, Fatah, had also begun in the late 1970s to establish a more organised presence in the occupied territories, including the Gaza Strip. Fatah established a number of

organisations during this period, including women's associations, student organisations, trade unions etc. Thus Fatah, too, wanted to acquire greater control and legitimacy within the occupied territories. Until then the main strength of the organisation had been in the Palestinian Diaspora. In connection with the establishment of the IUG in the late 1970s, Fatah entered into an alliance with the Islamists in an attempt to prevent the communists and the left-wing factions of the PLO from getting control over the university. The tacit acceptance from Fatah increased the legitimacy of the Islamist trend in Palestine (see also Sahliyah 1988). There is no doubt that ultimately Fatah intended to take control of the university, but they never succeeded. A former leader of the PFLP, who had been employed at the IUG as a lecturer for more than a decade (since 1980), reported to me in an interview:

When I look back at that time, it was an open question whether Arafat was stupid, had just made a mistake, or if he was very clever and hoped that he could turn the situation around.

In early 1983 an open battle broke out between the Islamists and the Fatah-nationalists at the university (Abu-Amr 1994). The conflict lay in a series of power struggles around the leadership of the institution. The Head of University Riad al-Agha was fired, and a member of the Islamic movement, Muhammad al-Saqr, was appointed in his place. Fatah, at this point based in Tunis, refused to accept this change and after two months of unrest and strikes the conflict erupted into an open battle between Fatah supporters and supporters of the Islamist trend. According to the former lecturer quoted above:

I don't know what Arafat was thinking when he appointed Riad al-Agha as president ... al-Agha could be described as a charlatan ... When he met with people from Fatah he would say that he was part of Fatah and that he wanted to do everything for them. The next moment, when he needed new staff, he would go to Ahmad Yasin and then he'd appoint the new people.

The Islamists came out on top in the struggle, and by 1983 they had gained control over the university (Mishal and Sela 2000). However, clashes between Islamists and secular nationalists continued to occur, for example in 1985 and 1986, but in these cases the Islamists also emerged as winners. A reason for this was that the nationalists failed to create a united front. In 1985 Fatah alone fought the Islamists, while in 1986 it was the PFLP. Hence ever since 1986 the Islamists have had full control over the IUG. An indication that the nationalists had given up attempting to gain control over the university was when, in 1992, the PLO, or more specifically Fatah, established a new university alongside IUG, under the name 'al-Azhar'.³

3. Fatah no doubt chose to use the name 'al-Azhar' because of the legitimacy conferred by its association with the famous university of the same name in Cairo.

This move could be interpreted as an explicit attempt on Fatah's part to establish an institution over which they would have sole control. The year of its founding, 1992, was related to the ongoing peace negotiations taking place at the time and the consequent prospect – or hope – that the Palestinians would soon have secure control over the Gaza strip (among other places).

Since universities are by definition important recruiting grounds for the state apparatus, and since the IUG is Islamist-oriented, it was an obvious move for the secular-oriented PLO to establish a competing university in 1992 which could be used as a base for recruiting candidates for positions in the forthcoming state administration. Since its founding, the PLO-controlled al-Azhar University has developed into the largest Palestinian university in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and shortly after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 the IUG was regarded as an Islamist island in a 'Fatah-land'. However since then the popular support for Hamas in both the Gaza Strip and West Bank has been on the increase and the Islamist movement won a stunning victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of 25 January 2006.

The IUG and its goals: A moral university

According to my informants at the IUG the authorities at the university are not fond of being perceived as a Hamas institution. The head of the PR department, Ahmad Sa'ati, a former Hamas leader, says:

The IUG is an independent organisation that is not influenced by the attitudes of any one political party. It is open to all human thought and culture and works in accordance with scientific and technical developments. It shows mutual respect towards, and cooperates with, other institutions ... It does not adopt the political view of any Palestinian party, whether that party is religious or not.

When I pressed Ahmad Sa'ati to answer my questions concerning the university's affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas, he vigorously denied that any such relation existed:

No, I'm being completely honest with you. No, no, no. This is not a religious university. It doesn't belong to Brotherhood ... we aim for one thing: We aim to produce morally sound graduates. That is what distinguishes us from other institutions. We aim to produce moral graduates.

By 'other institutions' he hinted at the ruling elite represented by the PA and Fatah. In the late 1990s the image of the PA was hampered by corruption, mismanagement and its weakness and willingness to compromise on numerous issues in the negotiations with the Israelis – a view held by most Palestinians. Ahmad Sa'ati made it clear that the university aims for one

thing, namely the creation of moral individuals. The aim of their education was to create individuals who were loyal to their people and their country, who were upright, honest and did not cheat; or, to put it another way, to create *sound Muslims*.

In contrast to Ahmad Sa'ati's reluctance to refer to the IUG as an Islamist-oriented university, everybody else I encountered – be it teachers, students or administrators – expressed pride in the Islamist flavour of the IUG. Also the university's prospectus (*dalil*) made it clear that the university should be regarded as an *Islamist*-oriented university. It is presented as a university attempting to create knowledge on an Islamic foundation with a view to regenerating Islam, and it is thus bound up with the Islamists' attempt to re-Islamise society:

Its [IUGs] philosophy is based on the following ideas:

- It is a university that understands Islam as an all-embracing message (*risala*), philosophy and guide to life (*minhaj al-hayat*).
- The university differs from other Palestinian universities in having a policy of gender segregation.
- The purpose of the Islamic University is to serve Arab and Islamic society generally and Palestinian society in particular in accordance with Islamic philosophy, which seeks to create a new form of cultural development that can stand up to the cultural challenge confronting our nation. Furthermore it aims to foster good minds, good thinking, a vigilant conscience, awareness and good conduct, to cover life in all its aspects, to provide a holistic view of life, to establish cooperation with the surrounding community, and to encourage society to return to the original sources of this nation.
- The university's curriculum is planned to ensure that knowledge, development, culture and values are in accordance with Islam (IUG 1995: 2-3).

The prospectus underlines that the Islamic education project at the IUG is concerned not merely with the individual, but with society as a whole. The task of creating *sound Muslims* is synonymous with instilling in the individual student an organised way of thinking, a vigilant conscience, awareness, good conduct and a holistic (that is to say, Islamic) view of life. It is furthermore made clear, as expressed in the last paragraph of the section cited above, what purpose this kind of consciousness-raising serves. The aim is to use this kind of education, which is critical of the western hegemonic discourse, to rewrite history. In addition to this it aims at making students aware of the creative potential of Islam and thereby to lead the Palestinian people out of the cultural crisis in which they, and the rest of the Muslim world, currently find themselves. The need for this project, as implied by the prospectus, is closely connected to the perception of history and of Islam. Islam has been put on the defensive both economically, culturally and technologically, and the education offered by the university offers a way out of this crisis: an education aiming to raise students' awareness and activating them to be conscious of their situation,

as a precondition for changing the *status quo*. In the view of Islamists, this change can happen only through a revitalisation of Islam.

Welcome to the Islamic University of Gaza: A different university

The date was 7 March 1998. Some 2,000 students were gathered on the lawn of the IUG. It was the day of the introduction for the new students. The student council, controlled by the *Kutla Islamiyya* (the student branch of the Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas), had arranged the festivities. After some 5–10 minutes recital from the Quran, a number of Islamic hymns followed, focusing on the increasing gap between rich and poor in Palestinian society. In his introduction, the first speaker, Head of the Student Council, encouraged the new students to seek knowledge everywhere and to study hard. However, soon the speech took a different turn and focused on the conflict with Israel. Another Islamic hymn followed; this time with an anti-American flavour. Then, Isma'il Haniyya, a prominent Hamas leader, took the microphone and stated:

Science at this university is different. From the first day it is taught in the name of Allah. Our university is different, and our *minhaj* is different ... this university understands its obligation towards its students. It is necessary to bring up the students with the Quran and the *Sunna*. This is our *minhaj*. The majority of students in all universities in Palestine support *Kutla Islamiyya*. This is not strange; they know the truth (*al-Haqq*) from falsehood (*al-Batil*).

Isma'il Haniyya did not confine his speech to university politics alone. He also discussed the right to resist the occupation, and continued:

Look at the resistance movement in Lebanon. The resistance is killing the Israelis and the collaborators. The resistance is forcing Israel to leave the area, and the Government of Lebanon allows them to operate ... Here the [Palestinian] authority says no to resistance ... we demand from the Authority to allow the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam to do as they please. Israel will only obey under pressure.

Haniyya finished his speech by saying: 'Hamas is the true path, and we need them in our daily life'. At the end of the festivities small gifts were distributed along with kind words to the best of the graduates who had just finished their studies.

In the following, a discussion of how the IUG teaches during classes, and how the students perceive the knowledge they are being taught in two specific spheres of learning will be presented. First, classes in '*Islamicum*' will be discussed. This section is based solely on textual material used in classes as well as qualitative interviews. The section is followed by a discussion of the teachings undertaken by the English Department. This material is based on qualitative interviews as well as participant observations during classes.

***Islamicum* and Islamism: 'Islam is the solution'**

All students at the IUG (the relatively few Christian students are not included), were obliged to take *Islamicum*, a one-year course comprising a number of shorter courses, like Quranic studies, Sunna, Hadith, etc. As was repeatedly conveyed to me the centrality of *Islamicum* cannot be over-estimated. The various courses offered within this curriculum were given high priority by the administration of the IUG. It could be argued that the knowledge acquired through courses in Quran, *Sunna*, *Sirat*, etc., is the basis for all other knowledge at the IUG. This is related to the idea that teaching at the IUG – as stated by Isma'il Haniyya above – is being taught 'in the name of God', and all fields of study are taught from an Islamic – or rather Islamist – point of view.

One of the central courses within the framework of *Islamicum* was *Hadir al-'Alam al-Islami* (the state of affairs in the Islamic world). The textbook used for this course is written by a lecturer at the IUG, Salih Hussein al-Raqab, and is called *Hadir al-'Alam al-Islami wal-Ghazw al-Fikri* (the state of affairs in the Islamic world and the ideological invasion). To illustrate how the students at the IUG are being taught Islamism while learning about the Islamic world and its relations with the Western world, extracts from this textbook are presented below.

The textbook comprises a number of short chapters all dealing with issues that – according to al-Raqab – have influenced the development of the Arab-Islamic world throughout the past centuries. Hussein al-Raqab describes the Westernisation of the Arab-Islamic world, nationalism, women and democracy, and he also deals with the future of Islam and the new Islamist renaissance (*al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*). In the chapter on the Islamist renaissance he states for example 'Human kind will not reach a worthy life except by turning back to God and to the Quranic programme in action and conduct of life'. Al-Raqab is also exposing a bad image of the nationalists and the secular forces:

A large part of the youth is turning towards Islam despite the fact that most secular and atheist parties are trying to keep them away ... Several of these parties suffer from stagnation in both mentalities as well as in terms of ability to attract new members and supporters. Fewer people are knocking at their doors, and very often they fall victim to ridicule and irony. Because of this many members from the nationalist and socialist parties leave and join ranks with the Islamist movements (al-Raqab 1998: 297).

Al-Raqab attempts to spread hope for the followers of the Islamic movement. This is further elaborated upon in his account of how the West and Israel are fearful of the Islamist renaissance:

The enemies of Islam are aware of the danger posed by the Islamic awakening *vis-à-vis* its stepdaughter Israel and their interest in the area of Islam, which

is related to their agents in the Islamic world. They are collaborating by common efforts to eradicate the Islamic renaissance and its characteristics in an aggressive and hostile Jewish spirit that is directed against Muslims (al-Raqab 1998: 299).

In the above text, al-Raqab relates to a line of thinking heavily inspired by conspiracy theories. He does not clarify who the enemies of Islam are, but no doubt it is a reference to the major Western powers. Nor does he mention who their agents are, but it seems evident that he is pointing to Arab countries like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Having read al-Raqab, one is left with a feeling that Islam is awakening and progressing. Al-Raqab's goal is to create hope through Islamism, which as he tends to say is the only ideology of which Israel is fearful.

The students and *Islamicum*: An eye-opener

How did the students at the IUG value *Islamicum*? Did they adopt the ideas presented during classes in *Islamicum*? And if they did so, to what extent? While discussing the value of *Islamicum*, Munir, one of the interviewed students, stressed:

It opens your mind concerning many things about the way of life ... We have been taught a lot, which is important in our daily life ... Try to respect other people, try to respect their ideas, try to respect expressions of opinions quietly and in an academic way ... I was always criticising it. I always asked – why study it? However, it is a kind of culture – it is our culture. Recently, I realised that our culture should be awakened, and these requirements open our eyes to many things. We look at the Western people ... we study about the thinking of the West and the way how Christian people think about Muslims and how they invade us by their culture and civilisation. How they – the West – try to tempt us with their culture and change the mind of the Muslim people and to show the Muslim that ... try to change, and they fascinate them by their civilisation ... We know that in not many years ... America will have its fate like Turkey like the Ottomans; like the Soviet Union. Sooner or later it will collapse.

Munir underlined how he got to know his own culture and stresses a number of issues that are not regarded as university tasks: namely how to behave in daily life. Another student, Salim, elaborates further his views on *Islamicum*:

I think that after we have taken these courses we get a general idea – a clear idea – about our position in this life and the positions of other countries, and we will understand how we can deal with others. You must have an analytic point of view, and you must have a clear idea that all not stemming from the Islamic point of view is bad ... The aim of these requirements is to give us a general idea about Islam ... If I had not studied here – how can I then understand or know anything about communism, patriotism or nationalism?

'Islam is the solution' seems to be the conclusion. The obligatory courses within the frame of *Islamicum* work as an eye-opener for many students. After finishing the courses, they end up feeling that they know their own culture – the Islamic civilisation: a civilisation superior to all other civilisations. The students experience shows how they had adopted the views of the administration about Islam as a comprehensive system representing *al-Haqq*.

The way in which the students perceive history is based on a non-linear comprehension of history. Cultures and ideologies rise, blossom and then vanish. This happened with the Ottoman Empire as well as the Soviet Union. The same will happen to the USA, or so they believe. In this sense the university students expressed encouragement and hope for the future, and that Islam will stand a chance. In general the students experience seem to confirm Francois Burgat's claim regarding what Islamism can bring to the 'political man':

By adopting a vocabulary or a terminology based on local references, this intuitive culture returns its former Universalist claim, and restores the precious symbolic continuity interrupted by the irruption of Western categories (Burgat 2003: 50).

The English Department

As a consequence of the Islamic educational philosophy, which dominates the IUG, the knowledge that the students acquire is expected to be established within an Islamic frame of reference. During my fieldwork at the IUG, I was enrolled as a student at the English Department during the spring of 1998. I followed two courses; namely, 'Literary Appreciation' and 'American Literature in the 20th Century'. From my experience, during these courses the students were being influenced in a way in which a growing consciousness of the cultural differences between the Islamic world and the Western world was visible. This becomes evident from the following accounts.

A short while after my first two interviews with the students – which took place some months into the fieldwork – a professor approached me. He stressed that one of the students had brought to his attention that one of the issues being discussed during the interviews was the relation between Islam(ism) and American literature in his classes. He stressed that the only reason why he asked the students to read the texts from an Islamic point of view was *my* presence. He wanted *me* to benefit as much as possible. He wanted *me* to come to a better understanding of how the students looked upon Islam. Hence the way he structured his teaching was in honour of me. The brief encounter with the professor clearly illustrates that a researcher in no way can be a fly on the wall. Hence, there is no doubt that

my presence in the class did influence the teacher as well as the students. The Islamic angle might have been expressed with a stronger flavour due to my presence, but it was not something uncommon for the students. This was evident as they during classes time and time again referred to knowledge obtained during earlier classes – reflecting the same tendency of comparing systems and strong Islamist views.

The two examples of classes presented in this section can be characterised as ‘extreme cases’ where the Islamic context is more overt than average, but nonetheless they still illustrate the way in which teaching is being conducted at the English Department at the IUG.

The first example is taken from the first lecture of ‘Literary Appreciation’. During this lecture, the professor initially informed the male students of the outline of the course and stressed that the aim of the course was to enable the students to ‘evaluate, understand and criticise literature as well as being able to develop the ability to interpret a text beyond paraphrasing’. The professor furthermore stressed that part of the course would focus on language awareness. In order to strengthen the latter, every now and then the professor would ask the students to analyse a poem, focusing on content and linguistic style. This type of exercise occurred during the first lesson. The following is recorded during class:

The professor: “Today we will deal with language awareness ... I will present a poem called ‘The Cats’ Protection League’. I will write the entire poem. Look at the grammar, and then afterwards at how you as Muslims would interpret the text?”

[The British poet Roger McGough wrote the poem in 1997. It is found in his collection of poetry: *Bad Bad Cats*, 1997]

Midnight, a knock at the door
 Open it? Better had
 Three heavy cats, mean and bad
 They offer protection. I ask “what for?”
 The boss cat snarls, “You know the score”
 Listen man and listen good
 If you wanna stay in this neighbourhood
 Pay your dues or the toms will call
 And wail each night on the backyard wall
 Mangle the flowers, and as for the lawn
 A smelly minefield awaits you at dawn
 These guys meant business without doubt
 Three cans of tuna, I handed them out
 Then they disappeared like bats in hell
 Those bad, bad cats from CPL [Cats Protection League.]

Professor [Prof.]: “What do you think of the language?”

Student 1: “It’s very informal”.

Prof.: “Yes, it’s dialect. It’s common day language, even though it’s not a

friendly tone. It reminds us of American gangs”.

Student 2: “Jewish gangs”.

Prof.: “Yes, like during the [first] Intifada”.

Student 3: “Like the Jewish whenever ...”

Student 4: “It reminds us of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*”.

Prof.: “While reading the text, try to fill out the semantic and linguistic holes”. ‘Midnight’? Why?”

Student 5: “Darkness”.

Prof.: “Yes, It’s a very economic way of setting the scene. ‘A knock at the door. Open it? Better had’. Look at the adjectives. Later on they get very nasty. This is no fun. It’s serious. Did he give away the tuna voluntarily?”

Student 5: “No, he was forced to do it”.

Prof.: “Also note the use of imaginative language, for example ‘Bats in hell’. How would you as Muslims interpret the text?”

Student 6: “Why is he using the cats as symbols? Cats are soft and loving animals”.

Prof.: “The cats are a minority. This is why they created a league in order to protect themselves. Against what?”

Student 7: “Maybe it’s referring to the issue of race. ‘Midnight’ could symbolise the black”.

Student 8: “I believe that it’s referring to the current situation in the Middle East. The West and especially USA versus the Arabs. The cats are the West, and the man is a symbol of the Arabs”.

Prof.: “It’s a good point you raise. Like during the Iraqi-Crisis...”

Student 9: “I have a similar interpretation. The cats are symbolising the Jewish lobby in United States, and the man is a symbol of America”.

Prof.: “But we have to analyse it as Muslims”.

Student 10: “It has something to do with Western capitalism”.

Prof.: “We Muslims pay *Zakat* and *sadaqah*. We don’t need a league. In the capitalist societies the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. This is a reaction of the poorer classes”.

Student 8: “I read it from a social and psychological point of view. All wars are about food and the difference between rich and poor. The only thing that makes people commit criminal acts is hunger”.

Student 11: “I think the cats symbolise the Jews, while the man is a symbol of the Muslims – especially the refugees”.

Student 12: “Cats are fine and peaceful animals. Because of this the cats are symbolising Islam, which is a friendly and peaceful religion. However, when other governments – both Western and Arab – are breaching the rights of Muslims, we are forced to react although we are peaceful. Give us our rights back and we will be peaceful beings”.

Student 6: “I agree. See also the situation in Algeria”.

Prof.: “Ok, thank you. I think this is enough. As you see we read the poem in different ways. This was an example of language awareness. During this course we will every now and then be engaged in these kinds of discussions”.

With these remarks the class ended. The case demonstrates how the professor encouraged the students to interpret the text from an Islamic point of view. While being presented initially as ‘language awareness’, the issue was hardly touched upon, whereas interpretation was in focus. The poem is open for numerous interpretations, which is also evident from the lengthy quote above. The professor led off with a discussion on language. Soon, however, the class ended up discussing the political content of the poem, and the professor was very engaged, even leading, in this process. His understanding of the poem was clear: It’s about the failure of capitalism in the Western world. He pointed not only to this as the core content, but at the same time stressed that such a development could never take place within the confines of an Islamic state. The argument is that Muslims pay *Zakat* and *Sadaqah*. The students on their part were very keen on participating in the discussion, and most of them read the poem through strong anti-Jewish lenses.⁴ It is also characteristic that some of the students read it as a poem about contemporary Middle Eastern politics. Their interpretations were strongly influenced by their political circumstances and hence contained an extremely critical view, not only regarding Jews/Israelis, but also concerning the West at large. It was evident from the discussions that the students were reading the poem in a global context. Also of interest are the students who had severe difficulties in accepting the cats being the ‘bad guys’, as cats are regarded as clean animals by most Muslims. Thus, more than a few saw the cats as symbols of Islam which, due to severe pressure, were forced to react against injustice – if necessary by all means. Therefore, if on a number of occasions Muslims act violently, this is not because violence is an integral part of Islam, but rather because the situation in which the believers have been placed by the surrounding society has forced them to react violently. Thereby, an apology for violent Islamism was established.

Another example of how the Islamic point of view in some of the classes is being pursued is taken from the course ‘American literature’, and presented below. During the course, a number of texts were analysed, among them the *Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne. This novel is a study of puritan life in New England, a drama of fate in which the main figure, Hester Prynne, refuses to reveal to the surrounding puritan community the name of the father of her child. Her punishment is to

4. It might be more correct to see this as anti-Israeli lenses. Student 2, quoted above, stated that it reminded him of ‘Jewish gangs’. By and large, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip refer to Israeli soldiers as ‘the Jews’. Most have not seen any other Jews to modify their terminology. Hence taking the student’s comment about the ‘Jewish gangs’ to mean a general anti-Jewish sentiment is somewhat inaccurate as it rather indicates anti-Israeli sentiment. In Gaza, it often means Israeli army squads, that used to knock on doors during the Intifada in the middle of the night as those ‘bad cats’ did in the poem.

carry a scarlet letter 'A' for adultery. Hence, the drama is about the stigmatisation of Hester. The work of Hawthorne was discussed during a few weeks at the IUG. I will quote from a lecture in which the professor and his students were discussing the consequences of her stigmatisation, and her exclusion from the surrounding puritan society. At one point during the discussion concerning the punishment of Hester Prynne, the professor asked his students:

Prof.: "If you were the judge, what would you have done?"

Student 1: "Do you mean from an Islamic perspective?"

Prof.: "Yes, of course. If you were the jury, what would you say to defend her?"

Student 2: "Her husband was away... she was young..."

Student 3: "She was weak".

Prof.: "Women in general are weak".

Student 4: "We cannot judge her without knowing the future development".

Prof.: "In the novel she will live with the shame forever. In our Islam there is a rule that such a woman should be stoned. This is the punishment within the Islamic frame of reference. Death is better for her. She prefers to die rather than carry the scarlet letter".

Student 5: "Also, within the Islamic frame she would not have to die in shame. She would go to paradise. The scarlet letter is by the way also bringing shame to her daughter. It's hard to live in that way".

Student 6: "She should be allowed to live two years in order to bring up her daughter".

Prof.: "The Islamic judgement would be better for her".

This brief insight into the discussions illustrates yet again how the students are being encouraged to read literature within an Islamist frame of reference. 'How is Hester to be punished within the Islamic legal system?' asked the professor. He presented the answer himself: 'by stoning her to death'. Comparing cultures was one method of learning, as was the case in the obligatory courses in *Islamicum*. Western life and attitudes were presented – and rejected, and Islam was offered as the answer. The Islamic judgement was presented as more humane in comparison to the way the Christian puritans treated the adulteress. Consequently, an understanding of the superiority of Islam in both ethical and moral terms was developed in the dialogue between the professor and his students. In this way, a spirit of community revolving around Islam was being built up.

Islamism, English studies and the students

When asked whether the students acquired a feeling of enhancing their knowledge about Islam during the courses taken at the English Department, Salim, one of the students stated to me:

You are sitting with us during the lectures, and you know that during our interpretation we are entering from an Islamic point of view ... If we were in this or that situation, what would we do from an Islamic point of view? The first thing we do, when we interpret and analyse a text, is to analyse it from the perspective of our tradition, then we analyse it from the Western point of view. In *The Scarlet Letter* we try to understand why the author writes as he does. For me, and from an Islamic perspective, a woman like Hester Prynne needs to be killed, but this is not the case in the Western culture ... I think most of the students support the Islamic punishment. You know why? We have an idea that it is Islam that defines the punishment.

Another of the interviewed students, named Munir, expressed it like this:

I have not been taught about Islam during my classes in literature, because there is a separation. We have the Islamic requirements [*Islamicum*] and the English Department requirements. However, we also deal with the issue from an Islamic point of view. How would Islam deal with this or that matter? This increases the level of participation and adds something fruitful to the discussion ... We deal with two civilisations at the same time. We look at the text from a Christian and European point of view, and then people connect ideas. Then we mix the two cultures, this creates a new concept of thinking – a new way of thinking.

It is interesting to note that a number of students initially rejected the idea of acquiring and enhancing their knowledge of Islam. Munir rejected the connection, and at the same time, added like other interviewed students that of course they also read the various texts within an Islamic frame of reference. On the campus of the IUG cultures are being compared: the Western versus the Islamic. Munir referred to the result of this process as a ‘new way of thinking’. This is not to be understood as a cultural synthesis being established. Rather, it is an expression of a rising consciousness that Islam is all encompassing and relevant in every sphere of life. Throughout the courses in the English Department the students were often reminded of the shortcomings of the Western world, and at the same time they became aware – as pointed out by Salim quoted above – that the leaders of the Arab world are not acting in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

Concluding remarks

Islamism is to a large extent a reaction not only to the Western political and economic domination, but also to its cultural hegemony. Hence, some of the ‘political men’ engaged in the Islamist project make use of education in order to rewrite history and break Western hegemony. Education is also at the heart of the philosophy of Palestinian Islamists. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the Islamist movement in Palestine fought for control over the Islamic University in Gaza – and won. The aim of the IUG was to create ‘sound Muslims’, or so the Head of the PR Department at the

IUG described it. The general aim of the IUG is, through education, to lead the Palestinian youth out of the crisis that both Islam and Palestinian society are facing – by revitalising Islam and by recreating a space for Islamic cultural and political autonomy. The empirical material taken from *Islamicum* confirms that the intention is to create the 'sound Muslim', who is brought up with a specific frame of reference; an Islamist frame and an understanding of the world that is similar to the ideology and thinking of the leadership of Hamas.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the students at the IUG were 'learning Islamism' while studying there. Three spheres were active in the process: the activities organised by the Islamist run Student Council, the teachings during classes in *Islamicum* and the respective fields of study – represented in this article by the classes at the English Department. From my field-work it became evident that the students to a large extent adopted the worldview presented by their teachers. Furthermore, it illustrated how the students through the study of *Islam(icum)* gained 'cultural capital' – in a Bourdieuan sense⁵ – as they learn the cultural codes of Islam, and how to form their world view based on this knowledge. A similar process is also taking place during the classes in English. The 'enterprise' at the IUG allowed the students a feeling of reassurance and belonging, and this strengthened their Islamic identity. Despite the 'war on terror' and the Israeli right-wing government's successful attempts at linking up with the Americans, and despite the fact that Hamas at times has been under severe pressure, the Palestinian Islamists will no doubt continue their 'mission': Islamising Palestinian society 'from below' within Palestinian civil society.

Furthermore in January 2006 Hamas won a land slide victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, sweeping away Fatah's monopoly of power in free and fair democratic elections. Whatever the outcome, these parliamentary elections were an historic step forward in Palestinian democratic politics as voters turned out in unprecedented numbers, taking part for the first time in fiercely competitive, multi-party elections. But the elections also marked the end of a five-decades period during which the Palestinian national movement was dominated by secular nationalism and the beginning of a new phase in Palestinian politics dominated by an Islamist political culture. On the domestic Palestinian level Hamas's electoral triumph means that the process of 'reforming' and 're-Islamising' Palestinian society will now also take place 'from above'. A new Palestinian

5. Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was a left-wing French sociologist whose work ranged widely from philosophy to anthropology to cultural sociology. He extended the idea of 'capital' to categories such as 'social capital' and 'cultural capital'. For Bourdieu the position of an individual is defined not by class, but by the amount of 'capital' across all kinds of capital. 'Cultural capital' is a form of knowledge, skill, education and any advantages a person has and this gives him a higher status in society.

regime dominated by Hamas will attempt to take over the key institutions of the Palestinian Authority and set the political, social, cultural and educational agenda of the Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation. Until January 2006 Hamas advocated an Islamic state in Palestine – a state which would be partly the result of a gradual, continuous, incremental process of ‘re-Islamisation’, achieved primarily by education and social action ‘from the bottom up’ (Mishal and Sela 2000). However the questions are now: (a) whether Hamas will adopt a more radical approach to ‘Islamisation’; and (b) the extent to which a Hamas-dominated regime would use the PA machinery to ‘re-Islamise’ Palestinian society ‘from above’.

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