

## Palestinian Islamism and Lebanese militancy

### A conversation with Suhail Natour

Suhail Natour is the Executive Manager of al-Hamaei Human Rights Center in Beirut.

### The relationship between Islamism and Palestinian mobilisation – in Lebanon and the region

Palestinian resistance in Lebanon has always been more political and national than religious. The Palestinian movement in Lebanon is not based on confessional or sectarian divisions. All Palestinians face the same dilemma, and Islamism was not prominent at the time of the first intifada. Most Palestinians are Muslims, but the national cause unites all Palestinians – Muslims and Christians. However, the emergence of Hamas signaled a change, and Hamas has infused Islamism into Palestinian political militancy.

There are no inherent links between Palestinians and al-Qaeda or the Taliban. Many Palestinians who joined the opposition to the occupation of Iraq were caught up in general Muslim enthusiasm to resist the invasion of a major Islamic state. But Palestinian society in Lebanon was not involved collectively.

### Palestinians, national integration and citizenship in Lebanon

Palestinians in Lebanon consider themselves a national community that is seeking the right to return to Palestine. They do not want to be naturalised or integrated into Lebanon. Palestinians in Lebanon therefore demand universal human rights: that these be acknowledged and respected. But they are being denied by all political leaderships in Lebanon – Sunni, Shia and Christian. When Sunnis confronted Shia during violence in Lebanon on 8 May 2008, Palestinians – seen by many as the Sunni ‘military wing’ in Lebanon – did not get involved, showing that they do not have a factional or confessional bias regarding Sunni, Shia or Christian leaderships in Lebanon.

### Young Islamist, militant Palestinians in Lebanon

Hamas and Islamic Jihad are trying hard to recruit young Lebanese Palestinians. But militant Islamist youth are not a major force in Palestinian camps. Rather, there are small groups in specific camps. Those who are involved are motivated by repeated broken promises to uphold their human rights. Palestinian refugees are not inherently anti-establishment. Palestinian communities in Lebanon and Syria do not want to be political pawns, used by either the regime or the opposition. They have learned from the heavy price they paid when Yasser Arafat supported Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were ejected from Kuwait and other Gulf states.

Lebanese Islamist groups do not recruit Palestinians: they persuade Palestinian Islamists to join Hamas or Islamic Jihad. They do not want to be seen to be exploiting Palestinians for their own battles. And Palestinians have had minimal assistance from these groups. Common interests such as resistance to Israel and Palestinian prisoners are more Palestinian than Lebanese concerns.

There are some elements among the refugees who have joined Islamist groups and share their political ambitions. But they are comparatively rare and have little influence to create a broader climate of extremism. In fact, at least until now, Palestinians in Lebanon in general neither advocated religious extremism nor overtly took sides in Lebanese internal affairs. Most adopt a neutral stance, concentrating on efforts to reconcile all Palestinian factions in order to adopt a common strategy of struggle.

*Interview by Alexander Ramsbotham*