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Reforming or Instrumentalizing Zakat? A Study of Palestinian Media Coverage

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Executive Summary

This study reviews the media coverage of the struggle over the zakat committees in the Palestinian media after the 2007 internal split. The major newspapers in both Gaza and the West Bank as well as the main news outlets are scrutinized. These are the following: *Al-Ayyam*, *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, *Al-Quds*, *Ar-Risala*, *Al Istiqlal*, *Wafa*, *Maan*, and *Safa* news wires.

The reforms introduced by the Ministry of Awqaf in the West Bank in December 2007 provoked a controversial discussion in the Ramallah and Gaza-based news outlets. Two main contradicting arguments stand out: (1) reforms were essential to liberate the zakat committees from being used as a political tool, and (2) these were not reforms, but rather attacks against the persons in need. On the other hand, the moves by the Hamas Gaza government to dominate the zakat committees after the 2007 takeover invited fewer comments.

The study shows that most of the media discussion was distorted by political points of view. Editors of the papers and wires did not manage to use an independent and critical tone to discuss the events. The editorial policy in Gaza and West Bank media followed the official policies of the governments in control. With a few exceptions, the media coverage did not produce fruitful arguments which could have helped save the situation. Intellectual discussion was absent in the reporting as the issue was seen as part of a more severe battle over the religious institutions in general. Media coverage was always led by a general editorial policy which minimized the topic under discussion to a tool in the political struggle, thereby reproducing the instrumental treatment political parties gave to such important organizations.

CCDP Foreword

As part of the mandate given to the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) in relation to the publication of two detailed working papers on the zakat committees in the West Bank (Working Paper 5) and the Gaza Strip (Working Paper 9), the CCDP commissioned a short media study purported to analyze how local journalists of different political leanings covered the issue of zakat committees and the contentious reform of 2007. As the material covered by Dr. Atef Abu Saif, a Gaza-based researcher, and his research team proved to be quite substantial, it was decided to make this internal working document public in the present format.

The methodology and timeframe chosen for this study is described by the author himself, but it is worth highlighting the difficulties encountered to access all the material discussed below. The political division between a Gaza and West Bank-based Authority also implies a series of tit-for-tat retorsions between Hamas and Fatah at the journalistic level: some journalists faced difficulties in reporting when writing about the opponent's policies, or the frequent ban by the two local Authorities on distributing the print version of the semi-official party dailies. Fortunately, Dr. Abu Saif managed to collect all these various newspapers, both from Hamas/Islamic Jihad and from Fatah (with methods he describes below), which allows to sketch a quite nuanced and thorough picture of the zakat discussions.

The media study was commissioned in September 2010 and realized in the last months of 2010, which means that no articles published after January 2011 will be discussed in this study. Meant to be part of the preparatory desk study for the Working Paper 9 (concentrating on the impact of the 2007 reforms in the Gaza Strip, hence with a chronological focus on the period 2007-2010), the CCDP decided to make this material available for three main reasons. There exists very little literature on zakat committees and as the two working papers written by Emanuel Schaeublin are extremely detailed, the CCDP felt that since the present media study offers valuable and original material to the readers, it was worth disseminating it as a complement to the two publications. Furthermore, other scholars have done partial combing of media coverage in relation to zakat and Islamic charities, but no systematic analyses were made available to the scholarly audience. By and large, this study confirms that there was little or no coverage of the zakat committees pre-2007, confirming what Nathan Brown found, including that the politicization of the issue emerged after 2007.¹ Finally, since the politicization of zakat committees still looms large over the debates on Islamic charities and national reconciliation, the document offers food for thought about the need to tackle the issue from a broader perspective (looking at issues such as the meaning of politicization, freedom of association, etc).

¹ See for example a reference to Nathan Brown's media study for the period 1998-2007, mentioned in the CCDP Working Paper 5, p. 57, footnote 182.

A final note on the terminology. The present text cannot be read without knowledge of the other two working papers written by E. Schaeublin and assumes that the reader has a good degree of familiarity with the Palestinian contemporary history. Thus the text will not give details of the various cabinets, list of acronyms, decrees, etc. Finally, the CCDP let Dr. Abu Saif choose the terms of this report, some of which are more contentious than others: Thus, he uses the phrase 'June 2007 incidents' to speak of the coup/counter-coup that Hamas performed in June 2007 when it violently took over the Gaza Strip. At a time when internal dissenting voices emerge from Hamas about who favoured or opposed the military actions, there is little point in returning to these crucial weeks in this paper. It remains highly interesting to see the shift in the tone of the media coverage about the zakat committees, less in relation to the December 2007 events than in relation to the June 2007 events, suggesting that the zakat committees are really only a second-round casualty in the political battle between the two leading political factions in Palestine.

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Introduction

The following analysis reviews the media discussion around the struggle over the zakat committees (ZC) in the Palestinian media. It thoroughly analyzes the main media resources both in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip over four years, between 2007-2010,² with occasional references to the coverage in previous years (mainly 2005-2006). The research is divided into three parts. The first part presents a detailed review of the Ramallah-based media: *Al-Ayyam*, *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida*, and *Al-Quds* newspapers (all printed dailies), as well as *Wafa* and *Maan* news wire agencies (published online). The second part looks at the most important Islamic media published in the Gaza strip. These include: the semi-daily newspaper *Ar-Risala*, the weekly newspaper *Al-Istiqlal* and the wire online agency *SAFA*.³ In the third part general remarks and conclusions, drawn from the previous analyses, are presented.

The search for *Al-Ayyam*, *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida* and *Al-Quds* articles was done on the print version of the newspapers for the period from January 2006 to June 2008. An online research was done to review coverage during the period July 2008 until October 2010. By contrast, the review of articles from *Ar-Risala* and *Al-Istiqlal* was done on the printed versions that the author accessed in Gaza city.

Due to the political internal conflict, it was not possible to find all the issues of the Ramallah-based newspapers in Gaza. Similarly, it is not possible to find Gaza-based newspapers in the West Bank anymore. Indeed, at different times, the Hamas authorities in Gaza prevented the distribution of Ramallah newspapers in Gaza. *Ar-Risala* and *Al-Istiqlal* are not allowed in the West Bank either. However, being based in Gaza, the researcher managed to get some of the missing printed copies sent to him by journalists from Ramallah.

1. Ramallah-based Media

This section reviews the coverage of the Zakat conflict in the Ramallah-based media (and unless stated, all articles, institutions or persons quoted in this part are from the West Bank, while those quoted in part 2 are pertaining to Gaza-based media⁴). It is important to note that the different media under scrutiny are not supporting the PA policy in the same manner. While *Wafa* News Agency is the official news agency of the PLO and thus of the PA, *Al-Ayyam* and *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida* newspapers are closer than *Al-Quds* to the opinions of the PA. The two newspapers are edited by Fatah and a nationalist team. *Al-Quds*, on the other hand, tries, as much as possible, to distance itself from the partisan conflict between

² See 'Foreword' for an explanation of the timeframe chosen for this media study.

³ On the politics of media in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in general, see *Media Politics and Democracy in Palestine: Political Culture, Pluralism, and the Palestinian Authority*, Amal Jamal, 2005, Sussex Academic Press.

⁴ This means that in Part 1, a minister will actually be a West-Bank PNA minister, while in Part 2, by "official" or "minister", we will mean a Gaza-based and/or Hamas appointed official or minister.

Fatah and Hamas. *Maan* News Agency is an independent news reporting agency with a nationalist tone. Because of these different degrees of independence or closeness to the PLO/PNA, our detailed content analysis will proceed in three phases: first, the 'official view' will be discussed (1.1), then the semi-independent print media (1.2) and, finally, the semi-independent online agency (1.3).

1.1. *Al-Ayyam, Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida and Wafa* and the zakat issue

The reforms that the Minister of Waqf, together with the Prime Minister's office, launched in December 2007 occupied a large portion of the articles of the Ramallah-based media that focused on the zakat committees. Since the beginning of his term, Sheikh Jamal Bawatnah, appointed Minister in July 2007,⁵ started to voice criticisms on the performance of the religious institutions, with a particular emphasis on mosques and zakat committees. The misuse of those institutions (i.e. the use of religious institutions for other reasons than religious ones) was the main slogan that the government formed in June 2007 used in its struggle against the apparent domination of Hamas. Thus, according to the government, reforms were essential. Consequently, the intervention of the government was compared to a "saving mission", an image used repeatedly in various articles.

Statements by the Minister of Information Dr. Ryad Malki and the Minister of Awqaf on the need to reform the committees were reported in detail long before the reform started in August 2007. The government's discourse about the issue featured prominently in the local pages of the papers. Sometimes the issue even made it to the first pages. The PLO news agency *Wafa* also focused on those reforms and presented them as a response to a national demand. Thus the speeches of Minister Bawatnah and of his successor Minister Mahmoud Habbash were central in this new political struggle over various religious institutions – be it zakat committees, mosques, waqf properties, or Quran teaching centers.

Looking at one of the first comments given by the Minister of Awqaf on the issue, it is clear that the newly formed government was keen to gain control over the zakat committees. The comments highlighted management problems in the committees and stressed the need for governmental intervention in order to improve their work.⁶

The decree that reformed the committees and the names of the new members made the front cover of the papers. For example, in *Al-Ayyam* newspaper, the presentation of the decree is put in a box directly below the news discussing the reform, in the section dedicated to government news.⁷ A closer look at this page reveals how the paper dealt with the reform. For instance, in the second-most important place on the first page there is a photo of the Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad, surrounded by the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, with a banner behind them showing the pictures of the President and of the Prime Minister. The subtitle of the piece reads

⁵ See CCDP Working Paper 5, p. 19 and note 43.

⁶ "In a meeting on the Zakat committees Bawatnah emphasized the need to work according to the Palestinian Zakat Law", *Al-Ayyam*, p. 4, (13/8/2007).

⁷ "Fayyad announces that the government will not give up on its social commitments and will not accept the faction's manipulation of the citizens' needs", *Al-Ayyam*, p. 1, (5/12/2007).

"Bawatnah announces the formation of the central zakat committees in the West Bank". The main title reads "Fayyad: the government will not give up on its social commitments and it will not accept the faction's manipulation of the citizens' needs". As a consequence, we can conclude that the formation of the committees was considered as the "speech of the moment" for the papers and for the *Wafa* agency.

The review of the print media (*Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida* and *Al-Ayyam*) and *Wafa* shows that the reporters and editors adopted a position similar to that of the government. Statements of the Minister or his aides were presented without any criticisms, as if they were facts that no one can refute. The harsh statements made by the Ministers were repetitively quoted and were the main piece of information. Strikingly, the opinion of former members of the zakat committees was not mentioned. It is hard to know if they accepted the decision or not. Even Hamas' known reaction to the reform – which it described as a war against the committees – was not reported.

The PA-affiliated media reported in great detail all the statements, comments, decisions and press conferences or releases made by the government about the reforms of the committees. Thus, the statements made by the Minister of Awqaf, the Minister of Information, and also the Prime Minister, were put in a visible place in the main pages of the newspapers.

The Ministers' criticism that zakat money was used for political activities was extensively covered. Without referring explicitly to Hamas, the reports were pinpointing to the Islamic movement. For instance, Minister Bawatnah stated that some of the committees' members had abused the bank accounts of their committees. He did not fail to mention that 80 percent of those committees, where the violation existed, were formed after 2006, thereby referring to the reform of the committees introduced by the Hamas government (10th government⁸) after its victory in the legislative elections.⁹

The highly politicized profile of the committees was the background of most of the reports on the reforms. The committees were presented as being a place which was used for purposes other than helping persons in need. Comparatively, that issue was not reported before the Hamas 2007 take-over of the Gaza Strip. Apparently, the financial channels of Hamas and the government's newly launched campaign were the main cause of such change.

The centralization of zakat activities was emphasized. This included the need to have a special law that organizes the zakat committees, and required the integration of the committees at the village, camp and suburb levels, into one regional committee in each governorate. It also showed how government supervision of the committees was essential.¹⁰ In *Wafa*, in 2008 alone, more than 20 reports were written about the policies adopted by the Ministry and its activities concerning the zakat.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the various Palestinian cabinets and lists of ministers, see B. Challand, "Les mutations du leadership palestinien (1993-2007)", *A contrario* 5(2), 2008, pp. 70-75.

⁹ "Bawatnah discloses secret bank accounts and personal business done with the money of the Zakat", *Al-Ayyam*, p. 6, (28/5/2008).

¹⁰ There is no mention of the Jordanian law but rather of a special law which organizes the workings of the committees.

According to *Wafa*, the Minister of Awqaf did not miss an opportunity to talk about the zakat reforms – even when he talked about the prisoners in the Israeli jails,¹¹ or when he gave the Friday sermon that the President attended.¹² The article reported that he considers the zakat reform as a national security issue. It was the Prime Minister who announced the official reform. In his speech that appeared in the PA affiliated media, Dr. Salam Fayyad connected the success of the reform of the committees to the success of the national project (i.e. the creation of the Palestinian state).¹³ The importance of a successful reform was highlighted to show how the steps taken were essential. For Dr. Fayyad there was a need to put an end to what he called the "darkness", i.e. the robbing of the money of the poor families under the umbrella of the zakat committees.¹⁴

Wafa reported one of the strongest and most assertive arguments made by Minister Bawatnah about the need to reform the ZCs and about the politicization of religion in Palestine. He stated that the problematic relation between religion and politics came to the surface in Palestine after the legislative elections and Hamas victory in 2006 and its ensuing coup in June 2007. For the Minister, religious people have the right to speak about politics because religion is politics and the Palestinian people are religious by nature. However, no one has the right to use religion as a means to achieve political goals. In his words, politics should serve religion and not the opposite. For him zakat is part of Islam and it is the duty of the Ministry to take care of the poor and needy. Thus zakat money should be distributed with no political discrimination. This is the aim of the reforms he introduced.¹⁵

Attention was paid in the reporting to the government's efforts to show its care and its good relations with the newly formed committees. For instance, visits paid by governors to the regional committees were reported with pictures. Meetings between governors and the Minister were highlighted.¹⁶ Indeed, according to the new arrangements, governors are part of the supervising board of their local committees. The role of the other important religious institution – the Great Judge, Qadi al-Quda – was also highlighted, insisting on its complementarity with the work of the Ministry of Awqaf. Indeed, the Great Judge is reported to assign a waqf donation to the zakat committees¹⁷ and support the work of the Ministry.¹⁸

Likewise, some articles that included pictures mentioned the visits paid by some of the leaders of the security apparatuses. For example, the head of the commission for Political Guidance and Morals in Nablus, Colonel Mohammad Nasser, met with the head

¹¹ <http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=7005> (17/04/2008).

¹² <http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=1603> (22/02/2008).

¹³ "Fayyad announces that the government will not give up on its social commitments and will not accept the faction's manipulation of the citizens' needs", *Al-Ayyam*, p. 1, (5/12/2007).

¹⁴ "Today, Bawatnah gives important information on the Gaza pilgrimage", *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida*, p. 1 (21/10/2007).

¹⁵ <http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=7005> (17/04/2008).

¹⁶ *Wafa* reported four of these visits, see the links below:

<http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=45031> (01/07/2009).

<http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=61411> (13/01/2010).

<http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=27313> (24/12/2008).

<http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=12742> (24/06/2008).

¹⁷ <http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=7492> (23/04/2008).

¹⁸ <http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php?action=detail&id=6978> (17/04/2008).

of a zakat committee. In the meeting the Colonel called upon the committee to distribute the zakat money to the persons that were actually in need. In another article, the visit of a delegation of the security apparatuses in Tulkarem to the hospital of the zakat committee was reported. The head of the committee in the city said that his visit reflected the concern of the Palestinian security institution for this segment of the society, which needs compassion.¹⁹

In addition, most of the ministries' activities to empower the newly formed committees were reported. This included agreements signed by the Minister with third parties like the United Arab Emirates agencies or British Helping Palestinians in Need (Interpal).²⁰ The achievements of the new committees were highlighted. For example, *Al-Hayat al-Jadida* and *Al-Ayyam* reported that the West Bank committees disbursed \$20 million in 20 months²¹ or that the Minister of Awqaf opened an eye surgery and a nephrology section in a zakat hospital (Al-Razi) in Jenin.²²

Therefore, we can easily conclude that the editorial policy of the newspapers and of *Wafa* on this issue was determined by the official discourse of the Ministry. Only the Ministry's position and its policies were reported.

Not surprisingly, there have been no reports about the activities of the committees in the Gaza Strip after the Hamas takeover while there had been a relatively sound reporting about their activities before that. This can be explained by two possible factors. First, the editors of the newspapers shared the view of the government in Ramallah that the measures adopted by the Hamas government in Gaza were illegal. The second reason would be linked to the relatively small number of reports coming from Gaza due to Hamas' views that those newspapers were being inimical to the Gaza government.²³ Similarly, Hamas measures against old zakat committees in Gaza were under-reported. Only the condemnation by Minister Bawatah of the Hamas measures was mentioned.

Finally, the reporting of the activities of the committees did not change in quality or quantity before or after the June 2007 takeover. In general, the activities of the committees appeared regularly in the local pages of the newspapers, even more than news about many other local organizations. With the transformation in the structure and membership of the committees, the Ramallah-based newspapers that discussed the committees' activities tended to be more supportive of their contribution to the public well-being in order to highlight the success of the reforms.

¹⁹ "The Public Relations Section of the Security Apparatuses offers flowers to sick people", *Al-Quds*, p. 5, (1/2/2010).

This article is an illustration of more general efforts made by the PA after 2007 and the loss of Gaza to work on changing the image of the security apparatus in the eyes of the general public.

²⁰ In his meeting with a British consulate delegation, Minister Bawatnah discussed the possibility of supporting the Zakat Fund and the Zakat Committees. See

<http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=159374&MARK=بواسطة يجتمع وفد من القنصلية>

or this link <http://bit.ly/ACO8kj> (28/04/2009).

²¹ "The Minister of Waqf declared: 'The ZC distributed \$20 million over a 20 months period under the current government'", *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida*, p. 7, (23/3/2009) "Bawatnah talks about 'Clear Reforms in the ZC and Control of the Preaches in the Mosques'", *Al-Ayyam*, p.9, (23/3/2009).

For a detailed discussion of the amount of money disbursed by the reformed ZCs, see Working Paper 9, p. 79-83.

²² "The Minister of Awqaf opens the eye surgery section", p. 7, (25/12/2008).

²³ As previously mentioned, Hamas prevented the two papers from being distributed in the Gaza Strip.

1.2. *Al-Quds* Newspaper

In *Al-Quds* newspaper reporting was slightly different. The reform of the committees was discussed only once, via a small first-page notice on 5 December 2007. No other follow-up appeared in the paper and no reactions (either pro or con) were presented. It seems that the paper did not want to take part in the quarrel on the zakat issue. Thus reports on the zakat were minimal at the beginning of the conflict (mainly during the second half of 2007 and the first half of 2008). News about the zakat committees in the West Bank were reported in 2008, while news on the Gaza committees started to find their way in 2009. Nonetheless, West Bank committees enjoyed more coverage than their Gaza counterparts. There were only fourteen reports in the 2008-2010 period covering activities of or mentioning the committees in Gaza. On the other hand, there were some 40 reports on the West Bank's ZC. The furious struggle about such important institutions in the society did not attract the attention of the paper. With the exception of a few mentions of some statements by some politicians, the paper did not seem to be interested in the conflict.²⁴

Even when reporting about the conflict, it tried to distance itself. Thus it used quotes from other media resources. For example, it quoted an article reporting statements given by the head of Preventive Security in Ramallah, Akram Rajoub. The report presented his argument about Hamas' use of zakat money to finance its activities. However the title was implicitly critical of the PA's response: it read the "PA launches a campaign in the West Bank against the financial resources of Hamas".²⁵ Nevertheless, the paper made sure that it used a report that was published in the London-based *al-Hayaat* newspaper in order not to bear any responsibility for its content.²⁶

1.3. *Maan* News Agency

The *Maan* news agency reported the West Bank reforms with a less supportive tone. With the June 2007 bloodshed in Gaza in mind, the reporting during the second half of 2007 was similar to the official discourse given on the zakat issue. Thus, the arguments about the need to centralize the work of the ZCs and the accusations of financial abuse of their resources were reported without any verification. For example, the Awqaf Minister in Ramallah was quoted in a headline saying that he was fighting the "personal and partisan use of the money of zakat".²⁷

²⁴ "Hanya accuses the PA of targeting the religious stream", *Al-Quds*, p. 5 (17/8/2010).

²⁵ "Al-Hayaat announced: 'the PA launches a campaign in the West Bank against the financial resources of Hamas'", *Al-Quds*, (4/9/2008).

<http://www.alquds.com/news/article/view/id/43806>

²⁶ Similarly, the newspaper copied a report from the London-based *Al-Hayaat* entitled "The Financial empire of Hamas", (29/5/2009). *Al-Hayaat* should not be confused with *al-Hayaat al-Jadida*, the latter being Ramallah based and pro-PNA, while *al-Hayaat* is a Saudi-funded pan-Arab international daily.

²⁷ "During his visit to Jericho, the Minister of Waqf said: we fought against the personal or partisan use of zakat money", <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=134417> (21/12/2008).

One of the reasons that the Government in Ramallah used to justify replacing the existing committees is the fact that some of the members of the old committees were already members of the PLC or of their municipal councils. According to the Minister of Awqaf, all those who participated in the municipal or legislative elections resigned from the committees (both winners and losers).²⁸ Also, according to a source quoted by *Maan*, some of them had been in place for many years.

The agency reported in details the speeches made by the government in Ramallah on the need to reform and failed to quote the opposite view. The claims made by the officers in the Ministry of Awqaf in Ramallah were taken for granted. For example, when the Director of the Zakat Trust denied the "rumors" that employees in the committees were being fired, he responded that in the Nablus committee there were about 40 telephone and internet lines. According to him, some of the employees had more than one paid job. He gives an example of a professor who is paid 1,000 JD in the university and receives a second salary of the same amount from the committee.²⁹ While comments from official sources of Hamas were rarely quoted, the dismissed members of the committees and their opposite views were never quoted.³⁰

The 2009 and 2010 reports concentrated on the Ministry's actions to empower the newly formed committees. News of meetings of the Minister with local personalities, international agencies and Islamic institutes, his meetings with the new committees and his political mobilization to support them, his speeches on the achievements of the new committees and his calls for the people to donate their zakat through the committees are all reported in great details.

Thus, the agency indirectly adopted the discourse of the Ministry although sometimes it tried to distance itself from it. However, as time went on, more attention was paid by the Agency to the activities of the zakat and waqf in Gaza. For example, while in the years 2007 and 2008 the agency did not report on the activities of the committees in Gaza under the supervision of the Hamas government, in 2009 and 2010 it wrote eight reports about them.³¹ With one exception, all these report referred to the activities carried out by the committees. There has been one report which talked about the impact of the Gaza siege on the committees, arguing that it has weakened them.³²

1.4. Discussion of the West Bank media

Overall, the columnists of the Ramallah-based media did not pay sufficient attention to the discussions about the zakat reform and its implications. Only a few articles discussed the matter.

²⁸ <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=81739> (20/10/2007).

²⁹ <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=87077> (4/12/2007).

The article does not give any name and remains vague in substantiating the accusation. Officially, members of the ZC were not receiving any salary.

³⁰ <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=81510> (18/10/2007).

³¹ The *terminus post quem* is here mid-October 2010.

³² <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=212340> (16/07/2009).

First, it is important to note that, before the 2006 elections, the issue of who administrates the committees was a matter of concern neither for the nationalist media nor for the politicians. As the reports show, the committees were perceived as social and religious institutions with no impact on the political system. Thus, their role in helping the needy was appreciated and reported with enthusiasm. However, with the Hamas victory of the 2006 legislative elections, a link between the committees and Hamas social networking was indirectly made. The nationalist stance argued that governing a nation and its institutions is not like administrating a zakat committee or a mosque. In April 2006 the *Hayaat al-Jadida* writer Omar Al-Ghoul wondered if Hamas believed that it is going to finance the PA through donation and also with the money of the zakat committees.³³ Five months before the elections, Abdel Rahim Malouh, a member of the PLO executive committee and the PFLP political bureau, wrote in *al-Ayyam* that the role of political parties was not that of the zakat committees,³⁴ a statement that questions less the instrumentalization of zakat committees than Hamas' incapacity to properly govern. Indeed, according to the writer, being in power and administering the territories is more complicated than running a set of mosques or charities.

In a tone more critical of both the PA and Hamas, Moharam Barghouti, a columnist in *al-Hayaat Al-Jadida*, asked what the remaining options were for the Palestinians after the 2006 elections, Israeli measures on the ground and demands for political concessions to be made by Hamas: "Will reforming the zakat committees fill the vacuum left after not paying the PA's salaries?" he asked.³⁵ For a third commentator writing in the economic section of the newspaper, the chaos in the Palestinian economy and the subsequent disorder required to make several efforts. These included uniting the zakat committees in the West Bank into one committee and in Gaza in another.³⁶ Ashraf Al-Ajrami of *Al-Ayyam* wrote on the poverty in the Palestinian society following the new Hamas government. Analyzing the way Hamas ascended to power, he discusses how poverty directs the people to the mosque and zakat committees. This contributed increasing the popularity of the Islamic movements.³⁷

The only criticism of the reforms introduced by the PA in the West Bank was written by Atef Abu Roub in an article in *Al-Hayaat al-Jadida*. Abu Roub previously criticized the Hamas government replacement of the members of the zakat committees after its first government after 2006. In his article he argued that firing all the members of the committees was not fair. Thus, the individuals who worked faithfully to serve the poor families should be allowed to stay in office and those who did not should be replaced. For him, although some mistakes had been made, the existing committees have made great achievements that should be rewarded, not punished. His main concern was that the committees were going to be transformed into political and partisan committees. He declared that "It is not wise to insert the committee into the political system", given that

³³ Omar Al-Ghoul, "To what extent will the people accept the siege", *Al-Hayaat al-Jadida*, p. 7, (15/4/2006).

³⁴ Abdel Rahim Malouh, "Let's be honest with ourselves", *Al-Ayyam*, p. 22, (3/8/2005).

³⁵ Moharam Barghouti, "What is left?", *Al-Hayaat al-Jadida*, p. 6, (18/3/2006).

³⁶ Salman Mohamad Salman, "Economic Creative Chaos", *Al-Hayaat al-Jadida*, p. 7 {economic section}, (1/5/2007).

³⁷ Ashraf Al-Ajrami, "Poverty: consequences on the whole society", *Al-Ayyam*, p. 22, (20/10/2006).

the committee will have to change whenever the political system changes.³⁸ Another criticism was published in *Maan* about the male domination in the newly formed committees in December 2007. The contributor noticed that no woman was nominated as a member of the new committees and therefore called them "men committees".³⁹

2. Gaza-based Media

The following section aims to review the coverage of the zakat conflict by the Gaza-based media. It is important to notice that these media do not support Hamas' policy in the same way. *Ar-Risala* is known to be in full support of Hamas' political position. It represents the official press of the movement.⁴⁰ *SAFA*, the Palestinian Press Agency, was founded in 2009. It is very close to Hamas and its government. While *Al-Istiqlal* is also an Islamic newspaper, it is affiliated with the Islamic Jihad. It shares with *Ar-Risala* its criticism of the West Bank PA policy, but it has its own reading of the internal struggle that includes the zakat issue.

2.1. *Ar-Risala*

From the first day of the Fatah-Hamas tensions, and even before the zakat issue started, *Ar-Risala* became the mouthpiece of Hamas. Early after the Hamas takeover, *Ar-Risala* focused its reports on what it called the "cleansing against Hamas in the West Bank." In those general reports, attacks against benevolent organizations, social centers, Quran teaching centers and Hamas activists⁴¹ were described in a very biased language using sometimes words such as the "mafia of Abbas" or the "Dayton government."⁴² The words "cleansing" and "war" were in fact the catchwords for describing the activities of the government in Ramallah. For example, the words "war" and "religious war" were used three times in 2010 to refer to the PA attacks. Many other reports focused on what the newspaper called the "attacks against the Mosques." These were highly important to the policy of the paper. It criticized the Independent Palestinian Commission for Citizen's Rights for not covering these violations in its report.⁴³

The first report after the takeover to reveal the scandal linked to the Ministry of Awqaf appeared in response to the statement of the Minister of Information, Riyadh Malki, in Ramallah, in which he claimed that the waqf's money was used to buy weapons which

³⁸ Atef Abu Roub, "So that everybody does not lose from the reform There is a need to reconsider the decision to reform the Zakat committees", *Al-Hayat-Al-Jadida*, p. 8, (11/12/2007).

³⁹ <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=87216> (05/12/2007).

⁴⁰ The other newspaper close to Hamas *Filasteen* (Palestine) was not covered in this research, but would most likely yield results and lines of interpretation close to those of *Ar-Risala*.

⁴¹ See for example, "More than 645 attacks. PA apparatuses and Fatah lead a cleansing campaign against Hamas in the West Bank", *Ar-Risala*, p. 3, (16/7/2007).

⁴² Hamas media usually uses the terms to refer to the Palestinian government in Ramallah. Lieutenant General Dayton was assigned by the American administration to coordinate the relation with the Palestinian Security Forces from the mid 2000's until the end of 2010.

⁴³ "Analysis: the Independent Commission for Citizen's Right is a victim of bias and blindness", *Ar-Risala*, p. 6, (7/4/2007).

had been used in the takeover. As a consequence, the government in Ramallah froze all the Ministry's accounts in Gaza. According to *Ar-Risala*, quoting the Deputy Minister of Awqaf in Gaza, "Fayyad and his Minister Bawatnah appropriated the money of the waqf."⁴⁴ Another important issue covered by *Ar-Risala* was the reforms of the mosques in the West Bank. The decision of the Ramallah government to replace preachers and to kick out those affiliated with Hamas received a good coverage in the newspaper.

The 20 August 2007 issue of the newspaper devoted many reports on the decision of the government in Ramallah to close 103 organizations which it claimed to be close to Hamas. On the front page the main report was about what the newspaper called "Fayyad's war against orphans and needy persons." The title of the report was written above an image of poor people elbowing to get assistance, some of them carrying their own box of food. There was also a huge photo of Fayyad looking indifferent towards the crowd. Alongside the picture the subtitle read: "he decided to close a hundred benevolent organizations to hit Hamas".⁴⁵ A longer discussion of the decision continued on page 3 with views from Hamas leaders in the West Bank and members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. The overall message was that the closure of these institutions was a war launched against the poor, more than against Hamas. In a third piece in the same issue, the paper reported the Hamas counter-argument that described the decision as "a serious attempt to uproot the movement".⁴⁶ According to this report, the movement would lose from these actions but the needy persons would as well. The longest article, one page long, focused on the reactions of the organizations that were closed, including a special coverage of al-Salah Association.⁴⁷ The regular contributor to the newspaper, Yasser Za'atra⁴⁸, wrote his column on the same issue, in which he tried to show how this decision happened to be an implementation of a plan actually envisaged by Israel.

In its next issue, the paper continued its attacks against the West Bank decision, with three reports devoted to the issue. One read "Closing the organizations is Fayyad's failed attempt to besiege Hamas". Above an expressive image of a man writing on a door "the organization is closed by a decision of the Authority", the title of the second article read "Will the policy of weakening the roots succeed in weakening Hamas?" Of course the reporter answered negatively. In the third report, a member of the Hamas political bureau reacted at length to the decision. A similar focus was given in another report two months later, in which the reporter accused President Mahmoud Abbas and his government of politicizing benevolent work.⁴⁹

Another related topic covered by the media was the incapability of the PA to prevent the Israeli army from closing the charities in the West Bank. The Authority did nothing to stop the attacks. In July 2007 there were four reports about this. A title read: "Citizens: where is the PA? Or is its only work to fight the resistance?". Unsurprisingly, the

⁴⁴ "Riqib declared: 'Fayyad government controls the money of the Ministry of Waqf'", *Ar-Risala*; p. 9, (30/7/2007).

⁴⁵ See *Ar-Risala*, p. 1, (30/8/2007).

⁴⁶ "In cooperation with the occupation and the American Administration. Hamas said: 'the Decision of Fayyad to dissolve the charities is a dangerous step to uproot the movement'", See *Ar-Risala*, p. 5, (30/8/2007).

⁴⁷ On al-Salah Islamic Charitable Society, see CCDP Working Paper 9, p. 43ff.

⁴⁸ Yasser Za'atra, "Dissolving the West Bank organizations and the Wolfenstein plan", *Ar-Risala*, p. 15, (30/8/2007).

⁴⁹ Atef Abu Ammer, "Abbas is keen to fight Hamas regardless of the price", *Ar-Risala*, p. 4, (18/10/2007).

paper used a picture showing a PA man writing on the wall of a charity that was closed by an order of the PA.

The first article to touch upon the struggle around zakat committees appeared in October 2007 when Fayyad's government announced its intention to reform the committees. At the bottom of the first page the title read "by dissolving the zakat committees, PM Fayyad's government launches a war against the poor".⁵⁰ Two other reports explained the decision and its consequences. Reporting from Nablus, the newspaper described in details the decision and its impact on the beneficiaries.⁵¹ According to some interviewees, the PA should close the corrupted institutions instead of closing the zakat committees which offer them food to survive. Sheikh Ali Mostafa is quoted as saying that the committees existed before the establishment of the PA and that the steps taken were targeting Hamas members whose benevolent and social activities were behind the success of the committees. The reporter did not say who Sheikh Mostafa exactly was. He was, apparently, saying what the reporter wanted him to say, i.e. that the committees were successful thanks to the support Hamas offered them. This success was made clear with the particular emphasis of the article on the Nablus Committee. The other argument that the reporter wanted to put forward was that it is unwise to attack the committees because they are helping the needy. Some quotes in the report, however, emphasized the unbiased and un-politicized character of the committees. The other article in the same issue quoted the Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs in Gaza as saying that the closure of the committees aimed to dismiss the Islamist employees. The main goal was to distance them from the benevolent work.⁵² This is what Hamas Prime Minister called an "uprooting war against the movement" according to the main report of the newspaper on 5 November 2007.

When reporting about the decision to reform the committees, *Ar-Risala* focused for its front page on a statement it attributed to the Minister of Information in Ramallah saying the following: "we dismantled the financial empire of Hamas in the West Bank". In its larger and more detailed coverage of the issue, the newspaper referred to the reforms in the committees in light of the PA cooperation with the United States and Israel. After describing the intention and position of Fayyad's government, the report reminded the readers that "the steps taken by the Ramallah government coincides with the economic siege it imposes on the Gaza Strip to fail Hamas."⁵³ In another report dated 13 December 2007, the newspaper attacked Minister Bawatnah's decision to fire many of the employees in the committees.⁵⁴ It quoted a member of the PLC as saying that most of the members of

⁵⁰ "By dissolving the Zakat Committees, the Fayyad government launches a war against the poor persons", *Ar-Risala*, p. 1, (22/10/2007).

⁵¹ "The Government of Fayyad launches a war against the poor by dissolving the Zakat Committees", *Ar-Risala*, p. 5, (22/10/2007).

⁵² "After its war against the charities: Dr. Rikib: Fayyad's government closes the Zakat Committees in the West Bank in order to dismiss the Islamic employees", *Ar-Risala*, p. 9, (22/10/2007).

⁵³ "In light of the cooperation between Fayyad, Israel and USA, Al-Malki proudly declared: we dismantled Hamas's Financial Empire", *Ar-Risala*, p. 13, (6/12/2007).

⁵⁴ "In continuity for the dismissing policy: Bauatna decides to dismiss the employees of the ZC in the West Bank as of the end of this month", *Ar-Risala*, p. 2 continued on p. 19, (13/12/2007).

committees are jailed by Israel. According to the quote this is good evidence of the coordination between the policies of PM Fayyad and those of the Israeli government. Another report wrote six months later that the newly formed committees actually fit into the strategy of Fayyad's government. The same report stated: "it is known that many of the members of the committees are either prisoners in Abbas' jails or in Israeli prisons". As the title of the report mentioned, this switched the roles under the occupation regime.⁵⁵

The paper covered a press conference given by Mr. Bawatnah in May 2008 where he admitted he was waging his own "war" against the resistance and its institutions. He said that he "attacked" mosques and removed the Islamic inscriptions that were inside. He considered that the reform of the zakat committees was a decision that harmed the poor and the needy.⁵⁶ The report linked the resistance and the reforms to show how these steps were taken to weaken the resistance fighting the occupation.

Our analysis shows that it is clear that the media close to Hamas was reacting to the statements and steps taken by the government in Ramallah. With only one report referring to Fatah's use of benevolent organizations in Gaza, all the reports were reacting to the Ramallah accusations. In the heat of the debate, there was no attempt to explain the real success of the committees and the actual benefits that the whole Palestinian society has received in the past. Rather, most of the reports tried to link the decisions made by the government as part of a larger war launched against Hamas. On the other hand, the media close to Fatah made clear and direct arguments to justify the need to reform the committees on political bases. The main argument was that the committees were being misused by Hamas. Apparently, the horror of the events that took place in Gaza in June 2007 made such claims acceptable.

Ar-Risala referred twice to what it called a "Fatah charitable organization." The report published on 5 November 2007 accused Fatah of using Gaza Give Organization, a well-known charity in Gaza run by the wife of Dr. Nabeel Shaath, a member of Fatah Central Committee, to orchestrate attacks against the Hamas government. The report showed an image which it claimed came from an internal document of the organization admitting to this.⁵⁷ However the harshest attack the newspaper launched against the Fatah organizations in Gaza was directly after the Israeli war against the strip late 2008/early 2009. In a report in February 2009, the paper concluded that Fatah tried to do benevolent work⁵⁸ to support the people harmed by corruption, "in order to save its face after having failed to defend the people against the tanks and airplanes" – a reference to the operation "Cast Lead". Furthermore, Fatah organizations refused, according to the report, to cooperate with the government about the distribution of assistance to the population. The

⁵⁵ "Exchanging roles with the occupation: the security apparatuses in the West Bank ... arresting, attacking and closing charities", *Ar-Risala*, p. 6, (12/6/2008).

⁵⁶ "The Minister of Awqaf in Ramallah and his team recognise they are waging war against the resistance and its institutions", *Ar-Risala*, p. 3, (29/5/2008).

⁵⁷ "A document: Fatah is covered by benevolent organization to launch attacks and organize explosions in the Strip", *Ar-Risala*, p. 5, (5/11/2007).

⁵⁸ Such rather positive account must be read against the background of the first attempt to stitch the two parts together, as Hamas and Fatah made a declaration in February 2009 calling for a reconciliation process. See "Palestinians Pledge Era of Unity" (26/02/2009), BBC News.

report appeared to try to provoke the government against those organizations. It stated, talking about Western NGO staff, that "for the last few weeks, blond men and ladies have been touring the streets doing independent work without any coordination with the efforts exerted by the government and the Islamist organizations. Some of them are working separately with Fatah organizations." According to the report, this might harm the government's efforts to coordinate the reconstruction works in the Gaza strip after the 2008-2009 war. People from various Islamist organizations were quoted, but no Fatah activist was interviewed.⁵⁹ According to a report published in March 2009, the centralization of the distribution of assistance to the harmed people after the war was the main step taken by the Hamas government.⁶⁰ Another report hints at the fact that some unidentified organizations were manipulating the people to collect money.⁶¹ Three months afterwards, a third report after three months stated that the police had caught some individuals who were at the head of one of these organizations.⁶²

Overall, there have been very few articles about what the Gaza Ministry was doing concerning the committees in Gaza or any other religious institutions. The news covering the Ministry focused on its "hard work" to make the pilgrimage season a success or to show its concern about the Israeli measures against holy shrines. Even when the Minister of religious affairs briefed members of the PLC on the activities of his Ministry, the article did not mention anything about zakat committees while it discussed issues such as mosques, pilgrimage, awqaf properties and Quran teaching centers.⁶³ Moreover, in two separate interviews with the Minister that are more than half a page long, the newspaper did not mention the committees at all.⁶⁴

When comparing the coverage dedicated specifically to the zakat committees with that allocated to the activities of the charities that are classically known as pro-Hamas or even part of it,⁶⁵ one notices that the coverage about Hamas affiliated organizations were a lot more extensive. These organizations include al-Salah, Mujamma Islami, and the Islamic Society. Even when some reports focused on the work of the charities in the Gaza Strip and the impact of the siege on their performance,⁶⁶ there was no reference to the zakat committees, but only to Al-Salah, the Islamic Society and Al-Mujamma. Also, the activities of the Ministry of Welfare Affairs received good attention.

In addition, there have been no donation advertisement for the zakat committees (Palestinian newspapers, whatever their political leaning, often carry ad-like inserts calling

⁵⁹ "The Charities are working amid a storm of obstacles", p. 15, (12/2/2009).

⁶⁰ "Minister Kurd said: 'the government limited the disorder in the distribution of assistance'", *Ar-Risala*, p. 13, (12/3/2009).

⁶¹ "Affected people and families of martyrs are victims of charities which survive at their expense", *Ar-Risala*, p. 11, (20/4/2009).

⁶² *Ar-Risala*, p. 20, (24/7/2009).

⁶³ "Education committee in the PLC meets with the Minister of Waqf and discusses many issues", *Ar-Risala*, p. 9, (4/8/2008).

⁶⁴ "Abu Shaer warns against taking power away from the ministry", p. 8, (11/8/2008); "Dr. Abu Shaer said that Saudi Arabia promised to allow all Gaza pilgrimages from Gaza to make the Hajj", *Ar-Risala*, p. 8, (17/8/2009).

⁶⁵ For a thorough discussion of these institutions, see Working Paper 9, pp. 40-47.

⁶⁶ See for example "A siege paralyzes the work of the benevolent organization in Ramadan", *Ar-Risala*, p. 11, (27/9/2007).

for donations or notes thanking for a large donation). The only two organizations that published "donate" advertisement were Mujamma Islami, al-Salah organization, and al-Falah Organization, an independent Islamic organization.⁶⁷ There have been only two "thank you" notes. One was published by the people of Zaitoun, Sabra and Tal Al-Hawa quarters of Gaza to the director of International Mercy Office in the Gaza Strip.⁶⁸ The second thank you note was written by a local kindergarten to express its gratitude for the Islamic Relief Organization's donation of milk for its children.⁶⁹

2.2. SAFA News Agency

The Palestinian Press Agency (*SAFA*) was founded in mid-2009. As a consequence, it did not cover the conflict over the formation of the committees in Gaza and in West Bank. However, since its creation, the agency devoted a bigger portion of its coverage in comparison with other local media sources to the activities of the committees. It reported twelve times on the activities of the committees in Gaza, including six times about the Maghazi committee. These articles did not give any political analysis and simply reported on regular activities, such as the distribution of school bags to poor pupils, of small amounts of cash to poor people, etc.

Although based in Gaza, and closer to the Hamas government in Gaza, the *Safa* agency started in 2010 to report about the zakat committees in the West Bank. It reported five times about their activities: four times about the Hebron Committee and once about the Qabatia Committee.

2.3. *Al-Istiqlal* Newspaper

Being close to the Islamic Jihad movement, *Al-Istiqlal's* reporting concentrated on the PA attacks on its members. The massive campaign which took part after the Hamas takeover against the Islamic charities was not mentioned by the paper. There has only been one small report on the reaction of Hamas describing this campaign as "an uprooting war".⁷⁰ Even the only report that referred to the PA mission against these organizations was balanced: its title read: "in light of the Gaza June events [...] the PA acts brutally." The newspaper, during the four years that we cover here, wrote no article on the activities of the zakat committees, be they located in Gaza or in the West Bank. The only report which referred indirectly to the zakat was published in April 2010. While the title of the article did not refer to the zakat, one article mentioned *en passant* zakat when it reported about an activity run by "the Society Organization for Development and Support in cooperation

⁶⁷ An independent Islamic organization.

⁶⁸ "Thank you Note to the Mercy International in Gaza", *Ar-Risala*, p. 20, (20/5/2008).

⁶⁹ "Thank you Note to the Islamic Relief in Gaza", *Ar-Risala*, p. 2, (10/11/2008).

⁷⁰ "Hamas: the decision to dissolve the organizations is part of the uprooting war against the movement", *Al-Istiqlal*, p. 2, (20/8/2007).

with the General Directorate of Zakat in the Ministry of Awqaf...".⁷¹ In general, the paper rarely covered the activities of the two Awqaf ministries in Ramallah or Gaza.

Unlike the other Islamic newspaper *Ar-Risala*, *Al-Istiqlal* insisted on reporting about zakat as a religious practice and obligation, rather than addressing the institutions organizing it. Mainly during the month of Ramadan, when zakat plays an important role, the paper published speeches on the virtues of zakat and its proceedings.⁷²

Because the Islamic Jihad movement has been influential in the political division between Hamas and Fatah, *Al-Istiqlal* was freer to criticize the impact this division has on the practice of religion, such as the Hajj. In its coverage, it was critical of both sides. For example, regarding the flow of aid coming through Egypt, the paper asked critically: "where does the assistance that crosses the borders go?" According to the report there was dissatisfaction within the society and within the institutions about the way the assistance was distributed.⁷³ Two other reports took the same angle in March 2009 with the flow of aid after the Israeli war against Gaza.

When it reported on the closing down of the charities, *al-Istiqlal* referred to both the attacks by the PA against Hamas charities in the West Bank and the attacks of Hamas against the Fatah charities in Gaza. Even the title linked such closures to the occupation.⁷⁴ The political affiliation of the charities has been the topic of one report in the paper. It criticized the use of relief and assistance to gain political support. As the title of the article clearly stated, the work of the charities in both Gaza and the West Bank has centered less on assistance than on political goals. The same report criticized the fact that the activities of the charities vary depending on the period: it increases during Ramadan and then slows down.⁷⁵

2.4. Discussion of the Gaza media

Like the Ramallah-based media, *Ar-Risala* did not publish fundamentally critical articles about the zakat issue. Yasser Za'atra wrote that Hamas was paying a very expensive price in the West Bank. For him Hamas exposed itself after the 2006 elections and was targeted by both Israel and the PA. It is true that Hamas was attacked before (mainly during the 1990s), but after the 2007 June takeover, its institutions (including some charities and hospitals) had to comply with harsh measures. It was the price Hamas had to pay for its belief in democracy under occupation and for its takeover. It was, in the eye of Hamas, an expensive price.⁷⁶

A Hamas spokesperson, Fawzi Barhoum, was quoted in a separate piece saying that attacks against the charities proved that President Abbas was not serious about national

⁷¹ "Society Organization for Development and Support distribute cash assistance to the needy", *Al-Istiqlal*, p. 19, (1/4/2010).

⁷² See for example, *Al-Istiqlal*, p. 19, (4/10/2007).

⁷³ "Public Dissatisfaction form the way it is distributed: where does the assistance that crosses the borders go?", *Al-Istiqlal*, p. 5, (7/2/2008).

⁷⁴ "Targeting the charities is an old policy of the occupation", *Al-Istiqlal*, p. 5, (14/8/2008).

⁷⁵ Sultan Nasser, "The Charities are centers for seasonal assistance and its services are political", *Al-Istiqlal*, p. 5, (1/10/2009).

⁷⁶ Yasser Za'atra, "An expensive price that Hamas pays in the West Bank", *Ar-Risala*, p. 5 (21/7/2008).

reconciliation and only acted to please US State Secretary Condoleezza Rice.⁷⁷ For his part, Adnan Abu Amer, a regular contributor to the paper, argued that Israel was behind the closing down of the charities in the West Bank.⁷⁸ On the 21st anniversary of Hamas, an article concluded that the movement needed to pay more attention to its social organizations which helped built its local support. Although concerned with governance issues, the article argued that Hamas should not forget about these organizations.⁷⁹ According to another contributor, Hamas should concentrate its effort on developing its influence inside non-organizational structures (like the student movement, meetings in mosques) to be able to replace the vacuum left by the closure of the charities.⁸⁰

While it regularly criticized the policies in the PA – and in particular its political position and what it called its "security coordination" with the Israeli authorities, the newspaper then tried to criticize the policy adopted by the Hamas government in Gaza without being too harsh. This soft criticism was used to discuss policies in the religious field. For example, a report of *Al-Istiqlal* criticized the noticeable increase in the numbers of mosques in Gaza. According to Islamic Jihad, these mosques were not used only for praying: they were "political caserns" for Hamas.⁸¹

3. General remarks and conclusions

This final section aims to shed a more general light, possibly critical, on the ways in which the 2007 reform affected the life of zakat committees in Palestine. There are seven main critical points which I list below. But first I would like to make a more general conclusion. Before the 2007 events, very few media reports discussed the conflict about the zakat committees. The tensions that arose in the West Bank after the 2006 elections were reported by the Palestinian press in the West Bank. The majority of the coverage dealt with the accident in Nablus in April and May 2006 in which unknown persons attempted to burn down the Safa Dairy factory run by the Nablus zakat committee.⁸² As our analysis showed, few articles actually referred to the committees as a source of empowerment for Hamas. In general, the role of the zakat committees in alleviating the hardship the people are facing is appreciated. Such efforts are often listed as achievements beside the efforts of the PA and international organizations.

First, the reporting of the zakat committees' activity is illustrative of the institutional and political separation between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The review of the written media coverage (newspapers and news agencies) before the June 2007 clashes reveals unity between the activities of the zakat committees in both areas. General briefs

⁷⁷ "Barhoum said: 'the closing the West Bank charities is in preparation for the visit of Rice to please her with the performance of the PA'", *Ar-Risala*, p. 4, (11/8/2008).

⁷⁸ Adnan Abu Amer, "What is behind the Israeli attack against the charities", *Ar-Risala*, p. 18, (7/8/2008).

⁷⁹ "What is needed from Hamas on the day of its anniversary", *Ar-Risala*, p. 4, (15/12/2008).

⁸⁰ Yassen Ezidden, "The Future of Hamas in the West Bank in light of the Birzeit elections", *Ar-Risala*, p. 18, (27/4/2009).

⁸¹ Mohamad Najeb, "In Gaza the number of Mosques competes with that of the prayers", *Al-Istiqlal*, p. 20, (22/7/2010).

⁸² See for example "The Factory sponsors hundreds of orphans and poor families", *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida*, p. 6 {local page}, (25/5/2006). About the fire incident, see *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida*'s April 1st and 2nd issues.

by the former ministers of Awqaf appeared regularly in the press. In these briefs, in particular during the Ministry of Sheikh Yousuf Juma'a Salamah (2005-2007), the Minister used to give an overview of the activities of the committees in the West Bank and Gaza.⁸³ After the Hamas 2007 takeover, separate reports and briefs came from Gaza and from the West Bank reflecting the disunity of the religious institution and its political affiliation. The West Bank Minister briefed about the West Bank committees and the Gaza Minister did the same for his own committees.

Second, there has been no genuine discussion on the work of the committees and possible ways of improving their efficiency. Most of the reports were adopting one of the two sides with no attempt to explain the motivations of the other party. With a few exceptions, the media was used as a tool to foster the dispute over the control of the religious institution. This is undoubtedly a general characteristic of the Palestinian media. The analytical articles did not contribute anything about what the essence of the conflict was and how deterioration could be avoided.

For example, a discussion of the two zakat laws adopted separately in Gaza and the West Bank never happened. Apart from two short reports that appeared in the Gaza-based media about the adoption of the law by the PLC in Gaza and two others about a meeting between the PLC and the Islamic University of Gaza to discuss the text, as well as small references about its adoption by the West Bank government and the need to follow its provision while reforming the committees, there have been no details of the positive and negative consequences of each law. Also the tendency of each government to centralize the works of the committees did not attract any attention of the reporters, editors or commentators. There was no presentation of the pros and cons of these steps. Even the more independent media like *Maan* and *al-Istiqlal* did not comment on this trend.

Third, the June 2007 bloodshed in Gaza has been behind the decision of the Ramallah press to discuss the zakat issue by criticising the manipulation of the money for political reasons. Even though, for example, Hamas introduced changes in the committees when it formed the 10th government after 2006, these changes invited little discussion. In only one article published in *Al-Ayyam*, Fawaz Hamad criticized these changes. Hamad explained that the Minister implemented the changes provoked by the Hamas local leader in Jenin. For him this is a political decision which will influence the future course of the committees. He sharply writes to the Minister: "it will not be so long before your Excellency realizes that you made unprecedented mistakes which will be used to change all the committees (..) you made a policy in changing the committees according to the (political) color of the government which leads".⁸⁴ Actually, he was right, as in 2007 changes were introduced on a political basis.

⁸³ For example see the local page of *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida* on 13/11/2005 where Sheikh Salama reports in details the activities of the committees in every town and village in the West Bank and Gaza. See also his report in *Al-Ayyam*, p. 13, (10/5/2005).

⁸⁴ Fawaz Hamad, "This is not the way to do it, Excellency Minister of Waqf", *Al-Ayyam*, p. 15, (14/10/2006).

Fourth, reports on the Hamas intervention in the formation of the committees in Gaza is ill-reported, and this even in the nationalist press. Only *Maan* reported in March 2008 that the head of the Rafah committee was accusing the Hamas PM of dissolving the committee. He was saying that the government had no right to intervene in the workings of the zakat committees because these were benevolent and societal organizations. The government's act was "illegal," to quote his own words. In the last line, the reporter tried to find a personal political justification for the intervention in the Rafah Committee. He reported that some sources thought that the actions against the committee had been taken because its director, Mr. Shiqaqi, had attempted to make peace between Fatah and Hamas leaders.

However, although there were implied references to Hamas' attacks and measures against non-Hamas employees in the religious institutions in Gaza (mosques and zakat committees), for instance through the comments and statements of the government in Ramallah, such attacks and measures were not reported. One of the few indirect reports is *al-Hayaat al-Jadida's* coverage of the Hamas arrest and torturing of a man who works in the Maghazi committee because he was in contact with the Minister of Awqaf in Ramallah.⁸⁵ Likewise, the struggle over the committees in Gaza was reported in the media close to Hamas with only one report in 2007. After the Ramallah decision to freeze the bank accounts of Gaza committees, *Ar-Risala* described this step as a continuity of the war of Ramallah against the orphans. The report quoted a source in the Gaza Ministry of Awqaf explaining their position, i.e. that the committees in Gaza are not politicized and that no political party was affecting the workings of the committees.⁸⁶

The only reference, in *Ar-Risala*, to the Hamas government's intervention in the committees' work in Gaza was in a small report on the PLC's approval of the "Zakat Law" in a first reading. The head of the Legal Committee in the PLC from Hamas, Farj Al-Ghoul, was quoted explaining the need of the government to organize the zakat work. For him, this lessened its social burden and guaranteed that the money of the zakat goes for the needy with dignity. Also the law, according to him, came to fight the poverty and economic hardship that the Palestinian society faces. Apparently, he was arguing that there was a political and social need to centralize the activities of the zakat.⁸⁷ The second reference to the Law appeared more than a year and half later when the paper reported a visit by the Economic Committee in the PLC to the Faculty of Commerce in the Islamic University of Gaza to discuss the Law. As explained in the report, the Faculty had organized a conference to discuss the Law and the Committee's visit was to respond to the conclusions of the conference.⁸⁸

Fifth, the perception of the media and of the general public is that zakat committees in the West Bank are more important than their Gaza counterparts. It is worth noticing

⁸⁵ "It tortured a citizen and forced him to change his name: Hamas attacks the Open University in the Central Governorate", *Al-Hayaat-Al-Jadida*, p. 6, (4/8/2010).

⁸⁶ "Continuing its war against orphans, the Awqaf Ministry in Fayyad's government freezes the bank accounts of the Zakat Committee", *Ar-Risala*, p. 13, (29/11/2007).

⁸⁷ "The PLC passes the Zakat Law in its first reading", *Ar-Risala*, p. 9, (11/9/2008).

⁸⁸ "The PLC and the Islamic University discuss implementation of the Zakat Law", *Ar-Risala*, p. 6, (26/5/2010).

that, in the West Bank only, when the media covers a local activity in a village or a camp, it always mentions the attendance of the zakat member along with other dignitaries (mayor, head of police in the region, etc.) who sometimes even give a speech although they are not the organizers of the activity. Also, reports show that government officials always make sure to visit the committee's office when they visit a town or a village. For example, *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida* gave a considerable space to the zakat committees in its periodic reports about villages and towns.⁸⁹ In addition, when the Advocates Syndicate opened its Law Library, the reporter listed the main attendants, including the head of Tulkarem Zakat Committee. Likewise, when Al-Ayyam reported on the Nablus Technology festival, it mentioned the head of the city's committee amongst other attendants. On the contrary, Gaza zakat members were never mentioned as taking part in any social activity. This appears to be an illustration of the social representation of the committees in both regions.⁹⁰

Also, in the Gaza-based media, the activities of the zakat committees in the Gaza Strip attracted limited attention in comparison to the activities of Hamas' charitable organizations like al-Salah, the Mujamma, or the Islamic Society. While in 2007 there were only two short reports on the activities of the Beit Hanoun Zakat Committee and of the Nuseirat Zakat Committee, there was a coloured two-page report celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Society.⁹¹ In the report, there was an emphasis on the photos of Hamas PM and leaders of the movement taking part in the celebration. Also, throughout the year 2008, there was only one report on the activities of the committees in Gaza. On the other hand, the activities of the West Bank committees were almost not covered at all in Gaza media because of the ban imposed on the activities of these media in the West Bank.

In 2009 the activities of the committees received a comparatively good coverage. Four short reports covered the activities of Maghazi (two reports), Beit Hanoun and Sheikh Radwan Committees. A fifth report discussed the workings of the committees, "despite drying its money flow by Ramallah". According to Adel Sawalha, head of the zakat committees in the Ministry, the main obstacle that the committees faced was restrictions imposed by Ramallah.⁹² However the year 2010 witnessed the highest coverage of the committees' activities in Gaza. There was eight descriptive reports in total, six of which were about the Maghazi Committee, one about Tal Al-Hawa, and the last one was a general coverage of the Ministry's zakat activities. It can be concluded that this new attention happened after the Ministry replaced the old teams of the committees and when it was gradually able to assert its control of the PA institutions in Gaza.

Surprisingly, for the first time *Ar-Risala* covered an activity by a zakat committee in the West Bank after the "reforms" introduced by Mr. Bawatnah. On 17 March 2010, the paper reported about Tubas Committee's distribution of money to the orphans.

On the opposite, the committees in West Bank were the focus the media there. Even before the reforms were introduced, the details of any activity undertaken by committees

⁸⁹ See for example the report in the local page on the town of Howara, *Al-Hayaat-Al-Jadida*, p.10, (1/4/2006).

⁹⁰ This could also be linked to a more recent history of Zakat Committees in Gaza.

⁹¹ "The Islamic Society: thirty years of unique giving", *Ar-Risala*, pp. 10-11, (26/4/2007).

⁹² "Zakat Committees open their doors to needy people during Ramadan", *Ar-Risala*, p. 14, (24/8/2009).

across the West Bank were reported, with special attention given to the giant ones like Nablus, Jenin and Tulkarem. However, while it was equally reported before the takeover, the activities of the Gaza committees were not reported anymore afterwards. In general terms, the Maghazi Committee enjoyed the highest coverage in Gaza media, while Nablus and North West Bank to a lesser extent enjoyed the highest coverage in the West Bank. The reports on the West Bank committees showed that they are richer than their Gaza counterparts. For example, many of the North West Bank committees have established hospitals, clinics, schools and shelters of their own. The Nablus Committee was reported to have a dairy factory. It even donated a piece of ground to build religious courts and a school for the orphans.⁹³

Sixth, significantly, all the reports on the Gaza committees after the Hamas takeover quoted officers from the Ministry – either the Deputy Minister or the head of the zakat committees in the Ministry (Mr. Adel Sualha). No member of the committees was quoted in the reports. This reflects the high degree of centralization which has taken place in the management of the committees in Gaza since the Hamas takeover. For example, in 2006, it was easy to find a statement by the head of a local committee about the activity of his committee. One instance would be the report about the Jabaliya Camp Committee in September 2006, in which the head of the Committee Jamal Abu Habel was explaining the activities of his committee.⁹⁴ Contrary to this, members of the committees were quoted for the articles on the West Bank committees.

Seventh, there has been an emphasis on the role played by the Emirates in supporting the zakat committees in the West Bank. Long reports were devoted to cover the activities of the Emirates Commission for Charitable Work (*Hay'a Al-Amal Al-Khairiyya Al-Emiratiyya*).⁹⁵ Usually those reports undermined the attention that was given to the actual role of the committees. The names of the donating princess were mentioned and comments were made, first by the manager of the Commission and then by the zakat representative.⁹⁶ Even the Minister and some of the committees' members dropped within their comments a "thank you note" for the Emirates. For example, *Al-Quds* newspaper devoted five reports over a three month period to highlight the activity and generosity of the Commission in 2010. On the other hand, based on the few references available on this, the reports on Gaza referred to the Kuwaiti assistance to the committees and, to a lesser extent, and more recently, to Turkish assistance (both times in general terms).

⁹³ "Tamimi is given a piece of land to build a compound for religious courts and a school for the orphans in Nablus", *Al-Hayaat Al-Jadida*, p. 6 (local page), (3/2/2005).

⁹⁴ <http://www.maannews.net/arb/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=39168> (25/09/2006).

⁹⁵ See for example "Emirates Commission for Charitable Work starts distributing food baskets for persons in need" *Al-Ayyam*, p. 7, (30/8/2010).

⁹⁶ In *Al-Hayaat-Al-Jadida* see for example "Emirates Commission for Charitable Work adopts 15 orphans", p. 9, (30/7/2009).

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