Background

Muslim society is usually known for its traditional way of life, where the Sharia (Muslim law) is an integral part of the system of laws. The fact that the word "secular" is not used everyday shows the important role Islam plays in Muslims' lives.

This is the case with Territories-based Palestinians. However, there are historic differences between Gaza Strip-based Palestinians and West Bank-based Palestinians – Gaza Strip-based Palestinians are more conservative and are profoundly religious, whereas West Bank-based Palestinians are more secular (also due to the Christian population found in cities such as Beth Lehem and Ramallah).

After the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip (June 2007) and the establishment of its autonomy (after Fatah's opposition was brought down), a boost of islamization and radicalization process has been occurring within the Gaza Strip, and at the same time Hamas is gradually setting the stage for fundamentalist way of life.

Current situation in the Gaza Strip

Since the Gaza takeover, a significant increase has been taking place in regard to Islamic dress code, patterns of behavior, and Islamic codes; all suggesting the population agrees to Hamas ideology. The traditional dress and appearance are widespread, and include beards, veils, modest clothes, language and vocabulary used among devout Muslims (verses from the Qu'ran, blessings, and praises for Allah), as well as frequent prayings at mosques.
The above examples demonstrate Hamas’ ideology is penetrating into the public awareness. Having sovereignty over the Gaza Strip, Hamas dictates an Islamic agenda according to several aspects:

1. Enforcing Muslim norms and way of life:
   - **Stipulating a certain code of dress in streets, schools, and courts.** School girls are instructed to wear head covers and full-length robes. Female school principals threaten to suspend girls who do not wear the proper attire.
   - **Courts** – the High Judicial Council instructs female lawyers to come to court wearing Islamic dress (when body is fully covered) and directs judges to cancel hearings if they do not abide by the regulations.
   - **Hamas national television** (Al Aqsa Television Channel) – all female television announcers wear veils.
   - **The streets** – Hamas forbids men to swim shirtless at sea and shop owners to place female dummies at show-windows; Hamas also instructs removal of posters displaying women wearing lingerie.
   - **Gender separation** – Hamas forbids mixed gender swimming at sea and mixed gender ceremonies. In schools, teachers instruct students of the same sex. Moreover, Hamas aims to separate boys and girls in UNRWA schools.
   - Hamas police operates as a so-called modesty police. With the help of Waqf inspectors, the two arrest women dressed indecently and force gender separation. Married couples are compelled to present marriage certificates, whereas unmarried couples are forbidden from appearing publicly together.
   - **Leading a religious way of life** – Hamas monitors activity of internet coffee shops and directs an extensive public campaign at mosques by putting up posters and
distributing leaflets that warn from internet coffee shops, secular television stations, and permissive internet sites.

2. **Mustering the media and the educational system to disseminate Muslim contents and Hamas ideology** – Qu'ran lessons at schools and mosques have become common; Fatah-affiliated teachers were replaced with Hamas-affiliated ones, and Qu'ran lessons are taught at Hamas detention facilities. Detainees' prison sentence is shortened as an incentive for their becoming devout Muslims.

   The media is also closely monitored. It seems that Hamas runs the show when it comes to public talk: religious television shows are broadcasted, messages delivered by Imams and political leaders are widely disseminated, and of course, female television announcers are coerced to wear traditional Islamic dress.

3. **Establishing religious institutions and public facilities** – Hamas is in the process of building new mosques (and reconstructing existing ones), *Madares* (classes for Qu'ran studies), centers of Qu'ran studies, and Sharia courts. It should be mentioned that throughout July and August, Hamas took off one percent from the salaries of public sector employees in order to fund Qu'ran summer camps. It was decided that seven outstanding trainees would receive a trip to Mecca as a reward for their diligence.

4. In addition, Hamas makes tremendous efforts to establish Muslim-oriented economic and welfare institutions. Some of these institutions are the Islamic National Bank and the Al Multazem Insurance and Investments which are expected to follow Islamic economics with an aim to integrate economics and Islam. The Muslim-oriented economy forbids collection of interest and aspires to achieve social justice by conducting profit (and loss) sharing. De facto, Muslim-oriented economy is not much different from other economies.
5. **Legislating Muslim laws** – the Bureau of Legal Counsel and Legislation directed by Hamas, informed (November 2008) about its intention to publish a new "penal law" which falls into line with "Sharia laws". The intention to publish such law was recently reported (June 2009) by Hamas. The PLC’s second reading approved amendments to the penal law that are meant to prevent "immoral events in the streets".

The strengthening of Global Jihad organizations and Salafi ideology (which supports the return to the golden age of Islam) can be seen through the on-going islamization and radicalization processes within the Gaza Strip. Some Global Jihad groups include also Hamas dissidents (e.g. Jaljalat) who formed even more Islamic / radical groups after being disappointed with the path Hamas took.

Besides executing terrorism against Israel, these groups are trying to eliminate immoral elements in the Gaza Strip (according to their view) by forcing the population to embrace Islam as a way of life. They are engaged in an all-out war against internet coffee shops, against shops that sell women lingerie and video cassettes, under a pretense that they are full of explicit contents and licentiousness. In addition, they are also anti-Palestinian Christians (in the past years they attacked the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) library, the Rahabat Al Wardia School run by nuns, and the Beit Lahiya UN School etc.).

On the one hand, Hamas encourages these groups to impose an Islamic way of life. On the other hand, they pose a challenge to Hamas since they believe that the latter is not succeeding in conducting a "moral cleansing" of the Gaza Strip. Therefore, they have no choice but to conduct it themselves. However, Hamas radicalizes its stances as a way to prevent other elements from staking out the territory, hinder other
elements from expressing public criticism, and refrain from lagging behind other fundamentalist groups.

Summary

Ever since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip and established its rule there, it has been promoting islamization of Gaza Strip-based Palestinians, according to its ideology and aim to form Caliphates intended to replace the State of Israel.

Slowly but surely, Hamas is dictating a Muslim agenda, mainly to prevent public criticism and schism within the Gaza Strip. Hamas is persistent due to the increasing power of Gaza Strip-based radical Salafi and Muslim groups, forcing Hamas to demonstrate its loyalty to Islam. As a result, the Gaza Strip is experiencing a growing trend of radicalization and islamization.

Gaza Strip population keeps in line with Hamas' ideology, whether by choice or not, as well as politically, as seen in Hamas winning the PLC elections (beginning of 2006). Hamas has proven its ability to rule with an iron fist when dealing with opponents (the violent activity against clans, each belongs to a different stream: Hiles (Fatah), Dughmush (Army of Islam), and Jund Ansar Allah (Global Jihad). The impression is that the general public "got the message" and refrains from showing any resistance.

The public agreeing to Hamas' reform may be either a matter of choice or coercion, but one has to face the fact that the public gives its consent to Hamas incorporating an Islamic way of life, even if coerced to do so. The end result will be a fundamentalist Gaza.