

Hamas and the current situation in Palestine

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Foreword

Of all the Muslim lands under alien occupation, Palestine is perhaps the most serious challenge for the Ummah because it is not merely a question of land but also of the invaders' fictitious claim that they are the land's "original inhabitants", and that they were dislocated by the vagaries of history. This fiction is actively supported and financed by the Islam-hating West, led by the US, which has now declared open war on the Muslim world. Further, Islam's first *qibla* and the third holiest site, namely Masjid al-Aqsa, is located there and continues in peril of demolition by the zionist vandals. Many Palestinian Muslims residing outside Jerusalem (al-Quds) are prevented from entering the Masjid al-Aqsa to offer *jumu'ah salah* there. Frequent attacks by gun-toting zionist soldiers, who kill women and children and demolish homes, are used to intimidate and browbeat the Palestinians into submission. At least 10,000 Palestinians are held in Israeli prisons, where torture and abuse are rampant.

The history of Palestine's occupation and the subversion of its struggle for liberation are long and painful stories; none is more so than the subversion that has been under way internally. Foreign occupiers are only successful when they are able to recruit local collaborators. First, it was the Arab regimes that worked with the zionists even while pretending to be striving to liberate Palestine. Zionist nationalism was necessary for the survival of Arab nationalism to keep Islam at bay. Arab nationalism was finally exposed during the June 1967 war, when the zionists defeated not one but several Arab armies and occupied the rest of Palestine (the West Bank, Jerusalem and Ghazzah), and other Arab territories: the Sinai Peninsula and

Golan Heights. Arab nationalism, however, had already spawned Palestinian nationalism.

It is not widely known that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which emerged in the early nineteen-sixties as the main organization leading the Palestinian struggle, was established at the behest of then US secretary of state Dean Rusk. No one asked why the Americans would want to help the Palestinians to regain their independence when, in November 1947, the US had played a scandalous role in pushing through a UN resolution that called for the partition of Palestine, allocating 56 percent of the land to the Jews, who comprised a mere 30 percent of the population. The late Shaikh Asad al-Tamimi, former *imam* of Masjid al-Aqsa, told this writer that before the PLO was established Yasser Arafat had visited him in Jerusalem (the eastern half was then still free from zionist control), asking him to join his movement. Shaikh Tamimi advised Arafat to launch an Islamic movement for the liberation of Palestine. This would not only mobilize the true potential of the Palestinians but also win support from the rest of the Muslim Ummah. Arafat, according to Shaikh Tamimi, told him that he would consider this and get in touch with him. Arafat never contacted Shaikh Tamimi again. In June 1967, when the zionists invaded and occupied the rest of Jerusalem, Shaikh Tamimi was away on a visit to Lebanon. He could not return to Jerusalem and died in 1993 in Jordan, where he had spent his life in exile.

By then, however, not one but two Islamic movements had emerged in Palestine: Islamic Jihad and Hamas. It was Islamic Jihad that spearheaded the first *intifada* in October 1987, soon after the Arab League summit in Amman, Jordan, had declared Islamic Iran, not Israel, the greatest threat to the Arabs. This was when the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Husain, backed by the West and financed by his fellow Arab rulers, was waging a brutal war against Islamic Iran. The eruption of the *intifada* was a slap in the face of the subservient Arab rulers. The *intifada* also demolished the myth of zionist invincibility and changed the political equation in Palestine radically. Once the Palestinians realized the importance of Islamic resistance, there was no turning back. Hamas emerged on the scene in December 1987, transforming itself from a low-key social welfare organization to a resistance movement.

The experiences of the two *intifadas* (1987 to 1993 and 2000 to 2005) and of the treachery of Arafat and the PLO through the Oslo Accords, have confirmed to the Palestinians that Islamic resistance is the only option really

The experiences of the two intifadas, and of the treachery of the PLO through the Oslo Accords, have confirmed that Islamic resistance is the Palestinians' only real option. True, the price they have paid has been immense; it always will be when deviation from Islamic principles is so great.

available to them. True, the price they have paid has been immense; it always will be when deviation from Islamic principles is so great, but Hamas and Islamic Jihad have kept the flame of resistance alive even while Mahmoud Abbas, leader of the Palestinian Authority (PA), another Western-zionist puppet, continues to betray his people. Abbas and his cohorts survive on the largesse provided by the Americans and the zionists. The PA exists to facilitate the sell-out of Palestine; Hamas and Islamic Jihad are struggling to prevent this from becoming reality.

On the political front, the victory of Hamas in the elections of January 2006 was a serious blow to the PA and exposed its lack of support among the Palestinians. Within days of this victory, Elliott Abrams, a well-known zionist who was serving on the US

National Security Council staff, met a group of Palestinian businessmen in Washington and told them to stage a coup against Hamas, using force if necessary. The Palestinian businessmen, who were linked with the PA, believed that America would help in the attempted 'hard coup' that Abrams was advocating. It must be borne in mind that the PA was a partner in Hamas's unity government. When they attempted the coup the Fatah men, armed and trained by the US and Israel, were soundly defeated, and driven out of Ghazzah in June 2007. Before this the zionists had attempted to undermine Hamas by starving the Palestinians of Ghazzah. The power plant that supplied 60 percent of Ghazzah's electricity was destroyed, plunging it into darkness and inflicting severe suffering in Ghazzah's scorching heat. Then came the blockade of food and fuel supplies at the behest of Abbas. Hamas has withstood all this because it has the

Palestinians' support. The Zionists' aim of turning the people against Hamas by inflicting suffering has not worked, mainly because Hamas has refused to compromise or surrender the rights of the Palestinian people.

While Israel's relentless drive to ethnically cleanse Palestine and impose apartheid policies continues, Hamas remains steadfast against such oppression and tyranny. This is only possible because it has refused to betray the trust of its people. What Hamas has achieved in two-and-a-half years the PLO, and its successor the PA, did not manage in more than 40. This is the difference between an Islam-based resistance and one based on nationalism or the even more inconsistent ideology of secularism.

Although the Palestinians have a long way to go before they can throw off the yoke of Zionist colonialism, their steadfast resistance and the uncompromising stance of Hamas have strengthened their resolve. Even as they face both internal and external challenges, if they remain firm on their present course, we can look forward to the day when the racist ideology of Zionism, like its predecessor, Nazism, will be history. An Islamic movement, led by a *muttaqi* leadership with the backing of its people, is the only way to liberate occupied Muslim lands. The experiences of Hamas and of Hizbullah in Lebanon are ample evidence of this.

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Hamas: Islamic resistance movement and political party

The history of Palestinian resistance since the *nakba** of 1948 has gone through a number of phases, punctuated by a series of major, defining events. These include the foundation of the PLO in 1964; the Israeli capture of the West Bank and Ghazzah in 1967; the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982; the first *intifada* (1987-1993) and the emergence of Hamas; the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA); the second *intifada* (2000-2005); and the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2005.

The election of Hamas as the ruling party of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the elections of January 2006, the first national polls that they had contested, was another such defining event; one whose importance was clearly recognised by the enemies of the Palestinians, who immediately launched a campaign to punish them for their temerity in voting for their own interests rather in line with

* “Nakba” is the Arabic word meaning catastrophe. This is how Palestinians and other Arabs routinely refer to the creation of Israel in 1948. The war of 1967, in which al-Quds (Jerusalem), the West Bank and Ghazzah were lost, is sometimes referred to as the second *nakba*.

the demands of their enemies. It was also a major turning point in the political development of the Palestinian community, representing a transfer of popular support from the nationalist PLO as founded and led by Yasser Arafat to an Islamic movement rooted in the traditions

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of the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood) and inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Hamas, the *Harakah al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement), was formally founded in December 1987, at the outset of the first *intifada*. It emerged however from two separate traditions in Palestine, one being that of the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen, and the other being that of militant resistance symbolised by Shaikh ‘Izz al-din Qassim, the ‘*alim* and leader killed by the British in 1935. The key figure in Hamas’s establishment was Shaikh Ahmad Yassin, an ‘*alim* associated with

the Ikhwan, in the occupied Palestinian territories from the late 1960s onwards (*see box, p. 15*). He had started out doing charitable and religious work, and then had established a political group, the Mujamma al-Islami, in Ghazzah in 1973. His ideas were picked up by a number of young, Islamically-oriented Palestinian activists, both within and outside the PLO, which was the dominant Palestinian political group at the time. The formalization of an Islamic resistance movement was the natural next step, particularly with the eruption of the *intifada* in 1987.

Over the next two decades, Hamas has become arguably the dominant

Zionism and the problem of Israel

The proclamation of the State of Israel by Zionist leaders on May 15, 1948, was the culmination of a political campaign launched by Jewish nationalists in Europe in the late nineteenth century. The emergence of aggressive nationalisms caused immense trouble in Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most notably with the obscurities of Nazism and the Serbo-Croat attempt to exterminate the Bosnian Muslims. The difference with Zionism was that it combined its secular nationalism with a Jewish religious attachment to Jerusalem and the surrounding area, and a typically European attitude towards the colonization and settlement of foreign lands regardless of the interests or desires of those lands' indigenous peoples. The result has been the continuing tragedy of the Palestinian people.

Zionist immigration and settlement of Palestine at the expense of local people was a problem from early in the twentieth century. By the 1920s and 1930s, by which time Palestine was a British protectorate, Palestinian resistance to Zionism was vocal and active. The resistance movement launched by Shaikh 'Izz ad-Din Qassim ended only with his death at the hands of British troops in November 1935. This did not prevent a full-scale uprising against British rule and Zionist settlement in 1936, but this was brutally suppressed. At the same time, events outside Palestine were adding to the Zionist demands and Western sympathy for them.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, and taking advantage of the suffering of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis, the Zionists launched an all-out war to take control of Palestine. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. At this time, about 1.3 million Arabs and 600,000 Jews lived in Palestine, with most of the Jews being recent immigrants from Europe (in 1900, there were fewer than 30,000 Jews in Palestine). Jews owned only about 6-8 percent of the total land of Palestine. Nonetheless, the UN partition plan gave Jews 56 percent of Palestinian territory, as well as keeping the area of Jerusalem and Bethlehem as an international zone.

While Palestinians and Arabs protested that the vote was an imperialist irrelevance, Zionist leaders were already planning how to expand their territory. Their strategy was characterised by the terrorisation and ethnic cleansing of Palestinian towns and villages; the well-known atrocity

at Deir Yassin was only one of many such incidents. Meanwhile, the armies of neighbouring Arab states proved utterly unable to resist the well-armed and trained European Jewish settlers. When armistice agreements were signed between Israel and the Arab states in 1949, 77 percent of Palestine was in Israeli control, with Jordan controlling East Jerusalem and the hill country of Central Palestine (known as the West Bank), and Egypt in control of the coastal area around the city of Ghazzah. Over 700,000 Palestinians had been forced from their homes, the majority settling in the West Bank.

In the last 60 years, the Israeli state has repeatedly demonstrated more of the same brutal aggression that characterised its creation. Its treatment of Palestinians who remained within its borders has been likened to the apartheid state of South Africa. In 1967, it seized control of Jerusalem, the West Bank and Ghazzah. Its rule of those occupied territories has been even more ruthless than its attitude towards Palestinians within Israel. It has also repeatedly launched wars of aggression against neighbouring states, particularly Lebanon. Internally, it has developed a highly militarised society, in which political institutions are dominated by former senior military officers; again characteristic of ultra-nationalist states. It has also developed the only nuclear arsenal in the Middle East region, which it has refused to submit to international controls. And yet, despite these realities being widely recognised, it remains officially regarded by Western states as a model democracy and a victim of Arab aggression.

This perverse Western and international support for Israel, largely attributable to the political influence of Jewish minorities in Western countries (particularly the USA), extends to accepting Israel's claim to be seeking a peace settlement with the Palestinians since the Oslo Accords of 1993, despite ample evidence to the contrary. Palestinians and their supporters in the Muslim world, however, have long since realised that Israel's supposed pursuit of a peace settlement is merely a strategy to legitimise their conquest of more and more territory, and particularly their seizure of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. Zionist zealots have long dreamt of destroying the Haram and replacing it with a Jewish temple.

Whatever Israel's politicians may proclaim, Palestinians recognised long ago that Zionists understand only the language of resistance. In 2005, Israel was forced to vacate territory for the first time in their history, when they withdrew from Ghazzah, a Hamas stronghold. The lessons of this were reflected in the Palestinian elections in 2006.

political force in Palestine, despite a difficult relationship with the PLO and the Palestinian Authority established in the West Bank and Ghazzah after the Oslo Accords of 1992, and the constant attacks by the Israelis, who recognise Hamas and other Palestinian Islamic movements as the main challenges to their plans for the country. It was deliberately targeted for destruction by the Israeli authorities as part of their response to the second *intifada* (2000-2005), but emerged all the stronger, as proved by its strong political standing in Palestine since the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004 and the credit it received for forcing the Israeli withdrawal from Ghazzah in August 2005.

Like other successful Islamic movements, such as in Iran before the Islamic Revolution, and the Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas is much more than just a political or military force. It has an extensive social service network, devoting much of its budget — now estimated at about \$70 million — to funding schools, orphanages, mosques, medical clinics, food aid for the poor, and social facilities. These are facilities that the Palestinian Authority has failed to provide adequately. Hamas leaders and institutions are also known for their honesty and incorruptibility, in marked contrast to Fatah, PLO and Palestinian Authority officials.

Inevitably, however, given the challenges facing Palestinians, Hamas is best known for its clear and unwavering political understanding of the Palestinian situation and its military resistance to the Israeli occupation. From the outset of the peace process, Hamas argued that the Israelis were seeking only to strengthen their own position and that it was pointless and counter-productive to enter negotiations with them. It also argued that the Palestinian Authority would become an instrument used by the Israelis against the Palestinian people. After the Oslo Accords, Hamas sat back and allowed Yasser Arafat and the

PLO to pursue their strategy, confident that events would confirm its own analysis. At the same time, as Israel continued to expand its settlements and use force against Palestinians, Hamas refused to be

This time, Israel tried to destroy it by the targeted assassination of its known leaders and activists in 2003 and 2004, including Shaikh Ahmad Yassin in March 2004 and his successor, Abdul Aziz Rantisi, a month later.

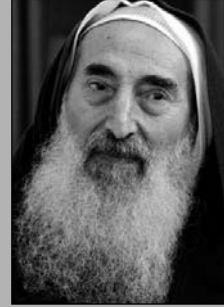
cowed, insisting on its right to strike back against the Israelis as and when required. It was Hamas that pioneered the use of martyrdom operations (“suicide bombings”) in Palestine in the early 1990s.

As this analysis was confirmed by events in the 1990s, Hamas itself became the main target against which the Israelis tried to use the Palestinian Authority, hoping either that the PA would succeed in suppressing the Islamic movements, or that internecine fighting could be provoked between Palestinian groups. This proved a forlorn hope, partly because of the maturity of the Hamas leadership in avoiding fighting within the Palestinian ranks at almost all costs, and partly because the popularity of Shaikh Yassin and Hamas prevented the PA from acting too firmly against them.

When Palestinians, fed up of Israeli manipulations of the political process, and concerned about the threat posed to the Haram al-Sharif by Ariel Sharon and other Zionist extremists, took to the streets again in September 2000, in what was originally known as the al-Aqsa *intifada*, Hamas again played a leading role, both politically and militarily. This time, Israel tried to destroy it by the targeted assassination of its known leaders and activists in 2003 and 2004, including Shaikh Ahmad Yassin in March 2004 and his successor, Abdul Aziz

Shaikh Ahmad Yassin, founder and leader of Hamas

We live in times in which people can find themselves regarded as leaders of Muslims on the most dubious of grounds – bombastic rhetoric, charismatic personality or simply being in the right place at the right time, for example.



Shaikh Ahmad Yassin, spiritual leader of Hamas, martyred in March 2004.

The sheer depth of feeling demonstrated by all Palestinians at the martyrdom of Shaikh Ahmed Yassin in March 2004 proved that his status was far greater than that. Born in the Palestinian village of Al-Jura in 1926, and crippled in an accident when just 12 years of age, Shaikh Yassin became a refugee in Ghazzah in 1948 when his village was bulldozed by Palestine's zionist occupiers. He joined the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen while studying in Egypt in the 1950s, before returning to Ghazzah, where he worked as a teacher of Arabic and Islamic Studies, while also becoming one of the area's most respected *ulama*.

This was also a time when the Ikhwan were developing many of Ghazzah's most effective social welfare and educational services, while political opposition to the zionist occupation of Palestine was dominated by the secular PLO. Like other Islamic leaders, however, Shaikh Yassin understood the importance of Islamic community organization and services, and that it provided an alternative basis for opposition to the zionists. As this Islamic opposition developed, Shaikh Yassin was arrested in 1984 and sentenced to 15 years in prison. A year later he was released as part of a prisoner exchange, and returned to the struggle. In 1987, he was instrumental in the formation of Hamas as an Ikhwan-based armed Islamic resistance group. This Islamic opposition came to the fore in Palestine during the first *intifada*, as the Palestinian people rejected the PLO approach and took direct action against the Israelis under the leadership of local, community-based Islamic groups and leaders. It was now that Shaikh Yassin emerged as a leader whose standing and popularity challenged those of Yasser Arafat, on the basis of the respect he had as an Islamic leader with a record of service to the community, his unimpeachable credibility, his clarity of vision, and his known sacrifices for the Islamic and Palestinian causes, despite his personal ill-health and physical disabilities.

As Israel cranked up its brutal response to the *intifada*, Shaikh Yassin set the tone for Hamas's response, including the adoption of military and martyrdom operations. He was arrested again in 1989, and then released again in 1997, as part of a deal by which Israel secured the release of agents who

had attempted to assassinate Khalid Mishaal, another Hamas leader, in Amman. One reason Israel was willing to release him was that he was increasingly unwell, having lost the vision in one eye and suffering from respiratory diseases and deafness, and the Israelis feared the explosion of Palestinian anger were he to die in custody.

If the Israelis hoped he would live in quiet retirement after his release, they were to be disappointed. Back in Ghazzah, he became a steadfast critic of the Oslo peace process and stood fast for the Palestinians' right to maintain armed resistance against Israeli occupation and repression. He also became a prominent critic of Yasser Arafat and the PNA. With the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, Shaikh Yassin continued to set the tone for Hamas's resistance, as well as its political dealings with Arafat and Arab governments.

When Ariel Sharon was reduced to attempting to eliminate Palestinian opposition by the assassination of activists, Shaikh Yassin became a target. On September 6, 2003, he narrowly escaped death when an Israeli aircraft fired several missiles at the house in Ghazzah where he was having lunch. He refused to change his schedule or go into hiding, predicting that he would be martyred. At dawn on March 22, 2004 (Safar 1, 1425), as he returned home following *fajr* prayers at the Mujamma al-Islamia mosque just 200 metres from his home, he was killed by missiles fired from an Israeli helicopter. Seven others, including one of his sons and two bodyguards who had been pushing his wheelchair, were martyred with him.

Even the Israelis, however, may have been surprised at the sheer depth of emotion that poured out in Ghazzah, the rest of Palestine and across the world for the martyrdom of a paraplegic 67-year-old who was revered more than any other leader in Palestine.

Abdul Aziz Rantisi, who was elected leader of Hamas in Ghazzah after Shaikh Yassin's death, expressed the feeling of all Palestinians when he said: "They kill our leaders, it is a war against Islam. I say to the Muslim nation, they have to wake from their sleep and they have to shake the ground of these Zionists and the Americans who stand behind them. Yassin is a man in a nation and a nation in a man. The retaliation of this nation will be of the size of this man."

Rantisi, a charismatic leader who had long been regarded as Hamas's second most senior figure after Shaikh Yassin, assumed the leadership of Hamas in Ghazzah, but was himself assassinated by the Israelis less than a month later. Some observers have argued that the assassinations of Shaikh Yassin and Rantisi left Hamas to leaders who were more open to taking it into domestic Palestinian politics.

Rantisi, less than a month later.

Their failure was confirmed following the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004. Although Arafat's former deputy, Mahmoud Abbas, was elected president of the PA in his place, and the Israelis invested great hopes in his ability to marginalise Hamas and relaunch the peace process, Hamas soon emerged as the dominant force in local politics, in the Palestinian National Dialogue through which Israel hoped that the Palestinian national aspirations would be watered down, and in terms of popular support and credibility.

After their withdrawal from Ghazzah, a Hamas stronghold, in August 2005, the Israelis tried to force the PA to prevent Hamas from taking part in parliamentary elections due to take place in Palestine in January 2006. (The elections had originally been due to take place in July 2005, but had been postponed by the Abbas administration for fear of a Hamas success.) The PA realised, however, that this was politically impossible and Israel was forced to accept Hamas's intention to play a fuller part in Palestinian politics. The result was Hamas's decision to take part in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) scheduled for January 25, 2006, and the historic results of those polls.

Hamas's entry to politics

It is something of a cliché to say that Hamas's decision in March 2005 that they would take part in the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council due to take place later that year was a radical change of direction for a militant Islamic movement that had previously rejected the peace process and the institutions of the Palestinian National Authority. Some commentators have gone so far as to talk of a "new Hamas" emerging at this stage. This, however, is to misunderstand the nature of Hamas in the period since its establishment in 1987.

Until 2006, Hamas was best known as a militant resistance movement, having emerged during the first *intifada*, maintained retaliatory operations against Israel throughout the 1990s, as Israel maintained its pressure on the Palestinians despite the so-called peace process, and played a leading role in the second *intifada* of 2000-2004. However, it was always more than that. Alongside its roots in the tradition of Islamic militant resistance to Zionism going back to Shaikh 'Izz al-Din Qassim's movement in the 1930s, it was also deeply rooted in the institutions of the Palestinian Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood), giving it both an Islamic ideological element and a tradition of providing educational, social and com-

The Oslo peace process and the establishment of the PNA

Palestinian politics since 1993 have taken place in the institutional context established by the Declaration of Principles signed by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in Washington in September 1993. This was supposed to be based on the principle of “land for peace” — Israel would transfer land to the control of a newly established Palestinian Authority (which the PLO chose to interpret as an embryonic Palestinian state), provided that the Palestinians delivered peace in place of the *intifada* and “terrorism” of the last few years. It established that Israel would withdraw from the Ghazzah Strip and Jericho, with additional withdrawals from further unspecified areas of the West Bank during a five-year interim period. During this period, the PLO formed a Palestinian Authority (PA) with “self-governing” powers — in reality, little more than municipal powers, with all major areas remaining in Israeli hands — in the areas from which Israeli forces were withdrawn. In January 1996, elections were held for a Palestinian Legislative Council and for the presidency of the PA, won by Yasser Arafat, who was proclaimed around the world as the first President of Palestine, maintaining the pretence of Palestinian statehood, or at least the genuine potential of Palestinian statehood.

In reality, the political scenario established by the Oslo Accords was hopelessly skewed in Israel’s favour, and was bound to achieve nothing for the Palestinians even if the Israelis had kept to their commitments. The fundamental problem was that the Palestinians were expected to make major concessions to the Israelis at the outset of the process, while major issues on which the Palestinians hoped the Israelis would be forced to make concessions, such as the extent of the territories to be ceded by Israel, the nature of the Palestinian entity to be established, the future of the Israeli settlements and settlers, water rights, the resolution of the refugee problem and the status of Jerusalem, were set aside to be discussed in final status talks.

For the PLO to have accepted so flawed an agreement would have been naive even if the Israelis could have been kept to it. In practice, with the US and the international community unwilling to place any restrictions on the Israelis, they were free to manipulate the agreement as much as they liked, regardless of the frustration and anger of the Palestinians. The PLO accepted this deeply flawed agreement with Israel because it was weak and had little diplomatic support in the international community. With the Palestinian territories in a state of

uprising, dominated by local political forces over which the PLO had minimal influence, a political agreement, however weak, was the only chance Arafat had to re-establish some sort of control over the Palestinian polity.

Speaking about the Washington negotiations in 1992, which were superseded by the Oslo Accords, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir later said that his strategy had been to drag out the negotiations for as long as possible while making the annexation of the West Bank an accomplished and irreversible fact. This was precisely the strategy that his successors followed during the 1990s. The negotiating process established by the Oslo accords was supposed to have been completed by May 1999. Instead there were repeated delays because of Israel's reluctance to relinquish control over the occupied territories, unwillingness to make the kinds of concessions necessary to reach a final status agreement, and its ever increasing demands on the Palestinians as new conditions for making concessions that it was already supposed to have made.

The image had been created of a negotiated and reciprocal "peace process"; the reality was that Israel had been concerned only to end the *intifada* and adjust its grip on Palestine. Little wonder, then, that Palestinians who had dared to set aside their deep-seated scepticism in the hope of achieving some degree of freedom became increasingly angry with both the Israelis and the political leaders who had got them into that position. Final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were to have begun in mid-1996, but only got underway in mid-2000. By this time, it was clear that the Israelis had wrung as many concessions from the Palestinians as they could, and had no intention of fulfilling the promises they had made; the Oslo Accords had served their purpose and were dead in the water. All that was left was to make sure that the Palestinians, rather than the Israelis, were blamed for their failure; this was achieved at the Camp David talks of July 2000.

By this time, Palestinians were totally disillusioned by the peace process, and prepared to confirm their support for Hamas, whose initial analysis of the peace process as nothing more than an Israeli stragemum, had been vindicated. At the same time, the institutional structure of the Palestinian Authority had been established as the framework of Palestinian politics, and it was within this structure that Palestinians looked to Hamas, hence the Islamic movement's decision to move into the political sphere in the period following the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004.

munity services to the Palestinian population suffering under the yoke of Israeli occupation. At the time of the first *intifada*, when Israel launched an all-out war on the Palestinian people, apart from leading the Palestinian resistance Hamas also proved itself the only organization capable of efficiently providing for the needs of the Palestinians suffering under Israeli attack.

Israel's response to the first *intifada*, and the rise of Hamas and Islamic Jihad as *jihadi* Islamic resistance groups in particular, was to turn to the PLO as a potential "partner for peace", despite having previously dismissed it as a terrorist organization. As part of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian National Authority was established as a pseudo-state operating under Israeli overlordship. Hamas rejected the logic of the Oslo peace process, saying that it did not believe that Israel was serious in wanting peace, and that the Palestinian

institutions established by the PLO under the terms of the peace process could only be exploited by the Israelis for their own purposes. At the same time, it did not actively undermine the new PA, arguing throughout that internecine fighting among Palestinians would only serve the interests of their enemies. The maintenance of a united Palestinian front was something that Shaikh Yassin in particular insisted on throughout his life.

Meanwhile, Hamas maintained its military activities in defence of the Palestinians, and also developing its social and educational activities.

Israel's response to the first intifada, and the rise of Hamas and Islamic Jihad as Islamic resistance groups in particular, was to turn to the PLO as a potential "partner for peace", having previously dismissed it as a terrorist organization.

The death of Yasser Arafat and the rise of Mahmoud Abbas

Yasser Arafat was not, by any stretch of the imagination, an Islamic leader. However, for over 40 years after the creation of the PLO, he represented both the Palestinians' aspiration for national liberation, and their mistreatment at the hands of a world besotted with the myths of Zionism. After the failure of the Oslo peace process, and his humiliation at Camp David in 2000, he spent the last three years of his life in virtual imprisonment in his compound in Ramallah.

Arafat had come to prominence in the 1960s, part of a generation of Arab nationalist leaders like Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt and Mu'ammarr Qaddafi in Libya. But he emerged not to lead a nation-state, but the struggle of a people deprived not only of nationhood and statehood but even of their land. Only in the last few years of his life did Arafat have something vaguely resembling a state to rule, as 'president' of the Palestinian Authority; and he quickly showed himself to be as incompetent, as authoritarian, as corrupt and as self-serving as any of his contemporaries in other Arab countries. The Palestinian people had no illusions about him on these counts, and criticisms of him and his administration quickly emerged. However, they also recognised that they remained at war against external enemies, primarily but not only the Zionist state of Israel, and he remained a symbol of the struggle until his death.

Long before his death, however, Israel and its international allies had begun planning a new attempt at subverting the Palestinian people after his departure. They had always hoped that the Palestinian Authority established under the Oslo Accords could be manipulated into serving as an ally against the resistance of the Palestinian people. Having failed to impose a settlement on the Palestinians through Arafat, they looked for another Palestinian leader who might prove more amenable, and found Mahmoud Abbas.

Abbas was one of the original leaders of Fatah, Arafat's group within the PLO, and was known as a pragmatist. He had served as prime minister under Arafat from March to October 2003, during which period he had shown a willingness to deal with the Israelis and the US, and to take on the Islamic movements. The US and Israel thus regarded him as someone they could work with, and promoted him as a future leader of the Palestinian Authority.

After Arafat's death Fatah needed a leader who would have international acceptability, and endorsed Abbas as its preferred candidate to succeed Arafat. Hamas decided against putting any candidate against Abbas, partly because they did not want a divisive presidential election after Arafat's death, and partly because they did not want to take over a position that they regarded as heading a political infrastructure subservient to the Israelis. Abbas was thus elected as president of the Palestinian Authority on January 9, 2005, with 62 percent of the vote.

Abbas immediately called for a Palestinian ceasefire, and for renewed peace talks. The US and Israel greeted his election as a positive sign, and rewarded him for cracking down on militant groups. In May 2005 Abbas travelled to Washington, and was promised \$50 million in US aid to bolster his regime, provided he succeeded in acting against Islamic groups, particularly Hamas. This was a continuation of a policy that had already failed: rewarding their allies in the Palestinian camp in return for their acting against the militants whom Israel could not defeat.

This however proved impossible for Abbas to achieve, not least because the Palestinian people had turned against the logic of the peace process, having recognised that Israel had no real interest in a settlement and that resistance was the only language Israel understands. Abbas also proved incapable of reforming the inefficient and corrupt PA administration, convincing Palestinians that only Hamas could govern the Palestinian territories effectively.

During the 1990s, it developed an impressive social welfare infrastructure, including relief and education programs, schools, orphanages, mosques, healthcare clinics, soup kitchens, and sports leagues. It also engaged in political debate with the PLO and other politicians, critiquing their policies and positions, and establishing a discourse on the peace process and the need for resistance that was gradually proved to be correct, as Israel repeatedly broke its promises and moved to grab more and more Palestinian land, despite its promises to vacate Palestinian land in exchange for peace.

When the Oslo peace process fell apart at the end of the 1990s, culminating with Arafat's humiliation at Camp David in 2000, Hamas's

analysis was vindicated in the eyes of the Palestinians, who had already lost faith in the peace process. As Palestinians took to the streets after Ariel Sharon's invasion of the Haram al-Sharif in al-Quds in September 2000, Hamas emerged as a leading resistance force during the second *intifada*, leading military operations against the Israelis. At the same time, there was inevitable pressure from Palestinians on Hamas to expand its activities into domestic politics.

As the Palestinians grew disillusioned with the leadership of Yasser Arafat and the PA, and realised that Hamas's reading of the situation had been correct from the outset, they expected that Hamas step up to replace the corrupt leaders of the PA and provide leadership in domestic and international politics as well as in military resistance. This was initially resisted by Hamas leaders, who argued that resistance against the Zionists was the first priority; but the pressure on Hamas became irresistible, especially when it became clear that the leadership that succeeded Arafat, under Mahmoud Abbas, was prepared to concede far more to the Israelis than even Arafat had ever done.

Hamas's victory in the PLC elections of January 2006

After Yasser Arafat's death in November 2004, Hamas decided not to put up a candidate to replace him as president of the Palestinian Authority, partly in order to avoid an internecine conflict with the PLO, which saw itself as the natural party of government in Palestine. However, by this time, there was intense debate within Hamas on its role in domestic Palestinian politics, with many members, particularly activists involved in community affairs on the ground in Ghazzah and the West Bank, pushing for the group to take a more assertive political role. This pressure grew after the election of Mahmoud Abbas as Palestinian president, when it became clear that he was returning to the discredited politics of dealing with the Israelis and the US in the hope of gaining concessions for the Palestinians. Two other things also became clear very quickly after Abbas's election: first, that he was willing to target the resistance movements on Israel's behalf, and second that there was no prospect of any improvement in the PA's performance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

After the presidential elections in January 2005, elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council were due to take place in July. In March, Hamas took a historic decision to take part in the PLC elec-

tions, the first time it would take part in any domestic political polls. This greatly added to the political pressure on Abbas, and he postponed the polls in the hope of improving his party's prospects of success. All this did, however, was give Hamas more time to prepare for the polls, and the Palestinians more time to get fed up of Abbas's government and decide that change was essential. Having initially encouraged Abbas to go to the polls, in order to gain what they hoped would be an electoral mandate for their plans, the US and Israel then tried to persuade him not to go ahead with them on the new date in January 2006. It was, however, politically impossible for Abbas either to postpone them again, or to exclude Hamas from them.

Hamas went to the polls on the basis of a manifesto document known as "The Electoral Platform for Change and Reform". Its attitude towards Israel and the peace process being well known, and the elections representing Hamas's first venture into formal Palestinian politics, this manifesto inevitably focused on domestic matters. It first explains Hamas's decision to take part in the elections despite having opposed the Oslo Accords that established the PA and having refused to take part in the first PLC elections in 1996. The document states that Hamas sees its participation in the elections as part of its "comprehensive programme for the liberation of Palestine, the return of the Palestinian people to their lands and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital". It also re-asserts its commitment to resistance as the strategy favoured by the Palestinian people to end the Israeli occupation.

The document then goes on to focus on the need for "change and reform" in the Palestinian Authority. Implicit in this approach is an acceptance of the fact of the PA as the institutional structure within which Palestinian politics now take place, despite the fact that Hamas had opposed the Oslo Accords, by which the PA had been established.

Hamas's key political leaders

The assassination of Shaikh Ahmad Yassin in March 2004 left the leadership of Hamas to a new generation of leaders who had arisen either among the resistance leaders in exile, or among the activists on the ground in Ghazzah and the West Bank. Such was the persecution of Hamas by both Israel and the Palestinian Authority under Arafat in the 1990s that all these leaders had been proven in the crucible of oppression and resistance. These are the men who have defined Hamas's policies in the complicated political situations that have arisen since their decision to enter politics after the death of Yasser Arafat.

Khalid Mishaal

Of all Hamas's leaders, Khalid Mishaal is perhaps the most recognisable around the world. Based in Damascus, Syria, he is head of Hamas's politburo and represents Hamas in its dealings with foreign governments and international organizations. He is also a leading figure in determining Hamas's political strategy. Mishaal was born in the village of Silwad, near Ramallah in the West Bank, in 1956 but was displaced to Kuwait in 1967. In an interview published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in 2008, he said that he was only ever able to return to Palestine once, at the age of 19, when he was already active in Islamic resistance activities in Kuwait but was not known to the Israeli authorities.



Mishaal became involved with the Islamic movement bloc of Palestinian activists while a student in Kuwait, and became a leader in the emerging Hamas organization in the late 1980s. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, he moved to Amman, where he became more closely involved with the Hamas leadership, becoming deputy to Musa Abu Marzouq when the latter became head of Hamas's political bureau in 1992. When Abu Marzouq was arrested in the US in 1995, Mishaal succeeded him. In September 1997, Israeli agents tried to assassinate him in Amman but he survived.

In 1999, Hamas leaders were expelled from Jordan under pressure from Israel and the US, and settled in Damascus instead. From Damascus, Mishaal has travelled the region representing Hamas in talks with Arab leaders and leaders of other Palestinian groups, as well as playing a leading role in the formulation of Hamas's own political positions and

strategy. He gave one of the clearest available statements of Hamas's current strategy in his interview with the *Journal of Political Studies* in 2008, in which he said that Hamas's immediate priority was to heal the divisions within the Palestinian ranks that had been created by the policies of Mahmoud Abbas.

Ismail Haniyeh

Until Haniyeh was named prime minister after Hamas's victory in the January 2006 elections, he was relatively unknown outside Palestine. He was, however, already a senior and respected member of the group. He was born in the Shati refugee camp in Ghazzah in 1962, where he still lives with his wife and eleven children. He joined Hamas at its formation in 1987, when he was a student at the Islamic University in Ghazzah. He soon became a leader in Hamas's student branch, and an administrator at the Islamic University after graduating in 1987.



In 1992, he was among more than 400 Palestinian activists, mainly from Hamas, who were expelled from Palestine by the Israelis and spent several months marooned in the Marj al-Zuhur area. After returning to Ghazzah a year later, he became dean of the Islamic University. In 1998 he became director of the office of Shaikh Ahmad Yassin, reflecting the high regard that Shaikh Yassin had for him as a confidant and aide. At the same time, he also developed a reputation for skilful dealings with other Palestinian groups, including dealing with the PNA during crack-downs on Hamas. In 2003, Haniyeh survived an Israeli assassination attempt. In October 2006, he survived another assassination attempt, this time apparently by Fatah supporters in Ghazzah.

Haniyeh is regarded as a principled pragmatist and selfless public servant. In the debates within Hamas leading to the decision to take part in the elections, he was a leading voice speaking in favour of participation, arguing that participation in the elections would not be inconsistent with Hamas's previous political stance provided that Hamas contested the elections on the basis of its established principles; and that Hamas had a responsibility to participate in the elections in order to provide an option for the large numbers of Palestinians seeking conscientious and God-fearing candidates in place of those previously available to them. The fact that Hamas selected him to lead their 2006 electoral campaign reflected the respect for him both within Hamas and among Palestinians more widely.

Mahmoud al-Zahhar

Mahmoud al-Zahhar, who became foreign minister in the Hamas government after the elections of 2006, is one of the older Hamas leaders. Born in Ghazzah in 1945, he was active in the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen in both Ghazzah and in Egypt, where he studied medicine. Back in Ghazzah, he was involved in the establishment of the Islamic University of Ghazzah and several medical societies and other social organizations. Although not a major public figure within Hamas, he was known for taking independent views in debates within the movement. He was one of the first figures within Hamas to advocate an interim settlement with Israel on the basis of a 'truce', which is now Hamas's policy.



Al-Zahhar was elected Hamas's leader in Ghazzah after the assassinations of Shaikh Ahmad Yassin and Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi in quick succession in March and April 2004. He himself was also targeted for assassination; in September 2003 his son was killed and he and his daughter wounded when Israeli aircraft bombed his house in Ghazzah. Several other people were also killed.

Abdul Aziz Duwaik

Until his arrest by the Israelis in June 2006, Abdul Aziz Duwaik was speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council and a senior Hamas figure in the West Bank. Born in Hebron (al-Khalil) in 1948, and educated to PhD level in the US, he became well known as the English-speaking spokesman of the 415 Palestinian Islamist deportees stranded in the Marj al-Zuhur border area with Lebanon after being expelled from Palestine in 1992. After returning to Hebron, he became professor of geography at al-Najah University and was not regarded as politically active, although he was respected in Hamas political circles. His appointment as speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council after the elections of January 2006 made him effectively the third most senior figure in the PA; according to the Palestinian Basic Law, which serves as a constitution for the PA, he would take over if the president, Mahmoud Abbas, were incapacitated in any way. In June 2006, however, he was arrested by the Israelis despite having parliamentary immunity. He is now imprisoned in Israel, accused of membership of a terrorist organization.



In line with its long-established critiques of Fatah's performance in power, in terms of both the authoritarianism and ineffectiveness of the Arafat and Abbas administrations, Hamas now promised to improve the performance of the civil institutions in terms of internal governance, and to re-focus them on the cause of struggle against Israel. Thus:

Change and reform will endeavour to build an advanced Palestinian civil society based on political pluralism and the rotation of power. The political system of this society and its reformist and political agenda will be oriented toward achieving Palestinian national rights.

The electoral platform then went on to provide a broad and detailed vision for all aspects of Palestinian life, outlining what Hamas would do in the areas of resistance, foreign relations, internal affairs, administrative reform, judicial reform, civil and individual rights, education, Islamic guidance, social welfare, culture and media, youth issues, housing, health, environment, agriculture, economic and fiscal policy, and various other key areas of concern to all Palestinians. Hamas's proposals in these areas have been described as combining modern and progressive politics with emphasis on the values of Islam.

This electoral platform, combined with Hamas's reputation for steadfast resistance, its record of public service, and its leaders' reputations for selfless, honest and conscientious leadership, clearly compared well in Palestinian minds to the record of Fatah in power in the PA for almost a decade and a half, under first Yasser Arafat, and then Mahmoud Abbas.

When the results of the elections of January 25, 2006, became known, the world was shocked that Hamas had won a stunning victory over Fatah and other secular Palestinian groups, taking 74 of the 132 seats

available, and winning 44.5 percent of the votes cast, compared to 41.4 percent won by Fatah. Hamas defeated or matched Fatah in terms of seats won in all but three of the 16 territorial constituencies, including winning all nine available seats in Hebron, four of the five seats in Ramallah, four of the six seats in East Jerusalem (despite not being permitted to campaign there by the Israelis), five of the six seats in Nablus, and a near whitewash of seats in Ghazzah. Only the seats awarded by proportional representation enabled Fatah to achieve 45 seats in the PLC, a distant second to Hamas. Nonetheless, Hamas had a comfortable majority, entitling it to form a government and take power on the basis of a clear electoral mandate achieved despite the best and often worst attempts of both the Fatah-dominated PA government and of Israel, the US and international organisations supported by them.

Hamas in government

By the time the election results became known, it was already clear to all in Palestine that Israel and the West would seek to punish them for electing a Hamas government instead of the Fatah one that had been expected. Immediately the results became known, a debate began within Hamas about whether the party should take office, or should accept a lesser role in a government headed by Fatah, in order to avert retaliation. In the end it was decided that Hamas had a duty to accept the responsibility given it by the electorate, and Ismail Haniyeh was nominated prime minister on February 21. At the same time, Hamas made it clear that it wished to head a government of national unity, including Fatah and smaller parties, in order to maintain Palestinian unity, as the party had long emphasised in line with the leadership of Shaikh Yassin.

It quickly became clear, however, that Fatah was unlikely to go along with this inclusive approach. At its final session on February 13, the Fatah-dominated outgoing parliament voted president Mahmoud Abbas a tranche of new powers clearly designed to limit the freedom of action of its Hamas-dominated successor. These included the authority to appoint a new constitutional court to act as an arbiter in disputes between the president and parliament, with the power of

“judicial review”: the right to review and overthrow laws passed by parliament that it considered to be contrary to the Palestinian Basic Law. The session also appointed Fatah loyalists to four key executive positions where they could obstruct Hamas attempts to reform government.

It also quickly became clear that the international community would punish the Palestinians for electing Hamas by slashing promised funding to the PA and refusing to deal with a Hamas government. Immediately after the vote, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice toured Arab states pressuring them not to support or work with the Hamas government. Although some Arab states took the opportunity to criticise the US’s hypocrisy over democracy in the region, and insisted that they would deal with the elected Hamas government, it soon became evident that they could not resist American pressure to boycott Hamas.

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Despite this reaction to its victory, particularly within Palestine, Hamas remained true to its commitment to Palestinian unity. At the first session of the new parliament on March 27, 2006, Ismail Haniyeh delivered a detailed policy statement that has come to be known as its ‘Government platform’. Like the electoral manifesto issued before the elections, this was a wide-ranging statement setting out Hamas’s intentions in a number of areas. After reasserting Palestinian grievances against the Zionist occupation of Palestine, and their right to resist by all means, the statement moves on to state

seven challenges that the government will focus on. These are: resisting the occupation; ending the security chaos in Palestine; relieving the economic hardships of the Palestinians; undertaking administrative and financial reform; reorganizing Palestinian affairs on a democratic basis; promoting awareness of the Palestinian question in Arab and Muslim circles; and finally, developing regional and international relations to serve the interests of the Palestinians.

In order to achieve these goals, the government platform proposed the establishment of a coalition government that would include all parties in Parliament, under Hamas leadership naturally enough. This, however, was unacceptable to both Fatah, which still saw itself as the natural party of government in Palestine, and Israel and its Western allies, who were determined not to have to deal with a strong and credible Hamas government rather than the weak and malleable Abbas government that they had become used to dealing with in the past.

As on so many occasions previously, therefore, Fatah and its security agencies were encouraged and primed to act against Hamas in order to undermine the main and most effective political organization among Palestinians; and as on so many occasions in the past, Fatah leaders proved perfectly willing to put their narrow political interest before those of the Palestinian people. This remained the case despite numerous efforts at establishing Palestinian unity; thus it was that matters came to a head with the schism between the authorities in Ghazzah and the West Bank in June 2007.

Palestine divided: the schism of June 2007 and the siege of Ghazzah

Having failed, after its election victory in January 2006, to persuade other Palestinian groups to work together in a government of national unity, Hamas established an administration led by Ismail Haniyeh that immediately found itself under attack in every conceivable way from the presidency of Mahmoud Abbas and the executive institutions still controlled by Fatah. To make matters even more difficult, many of these agencies (particularly in the security and military areas) had direct relations with Israeli and American agencies without reference to the PA government. In November 2005, the US had appointed General Keith Dayton to be security coordinator for Israel and the PA, charged with promoting cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security agencies, and training and equipping PA security forces loyal to Abbas.

As Hamas tried to press on with its reform program, it met resistance at every step from Fatah forces determined that it should not succeed in establishing itself in power. Internecine political and low-level military conflict between the two factions came to dominate Palestinian politics, at the expense of a constructive political program. Outside forces also did everything in their power to disrupt

Hamas's rule. On June 29, 2006, for example, Israeli forces arrested about 60 Hamas government ministers, members of parliament and other activists, including such senior figures as Abdul Aziz Duwaik

In February 2007, another agreement was reached, the Makkah Accords sponsored by the Saudis. The US and Israel were reportedly furious as this unexpected development... [and] gave Mahmoud Abbas and his allies three months to end the Hamas rule for once and for all.

(speaker of the parliament), Nasser al-Sha'er (deputy prime minister), and ministers Muhammad Barghouti and Khalid Abu Arfa. Meanwhile, Western and international sources, and even some Arab ones, held back the financial support that they had previously given to the PA, refusing to provide it to a Hamas government.

At the same time, there were repeated attempts to end the deadlock. In May 2006, a National Reconciliation Document, drafted by jailed leaders Marwan Barghouti of Fatah and Abd al-Khaliq Natsheh of Hamas, was agreed by both parties, but failed to hold under pressure from Palestinian agencies loyal to outside powers. In February 2007, as fighting between Palestinian groups reached unprecedented levels, another agreement was reached, the Makkah Accords sponsored by the Saudis. This again proposed a government of national unity which would be led by Hamas with nine seats in cabinet, and would include members of all other parties, with Fatah having six seats in cabinet. The US and Israel were reportedly furious at this unexpected development, and pushed security forces linked to them to renew fighting. At the same time, the US reportedly gave Mahmoud Abbas and his allies three months to end the Hamas rule for once and for all.

What came next — the division of the Palestinian territories into two sections in June 2007, with Hamas being deposed in the West Bank and Fatah forces expelled from Ghazzah — has come to be generally

What came next has come to be generally characterised as a Hamas coup or seizure of power in Ghazzah. This is precisely the opposite of the true situation. Hamas was already in power; it could hardly launch a coup against itself.

characterised as a Hamas coup or seizure of power in Ghazzah. This is precisely the opposite of the true situation. Hamas was already in power; it could hardly launch a coup against itself. What it did was to restore order in Ghazzah, always a Hamas stronghold, which was the scene of the worst agitation and violence against the Hamas government by Fatah and other security agencies encouraged by the US and Israel. In June 2007 Hamas decided to act firmly against them to restore the rule of law, and were surprised at how quickly they collapsed,

leaving Hamas unchallenged. It is this that has been mischaracterised as a coup.

Abbas, meanwhile, decided to use the developments in Ghazzah as a pretext for acting against Hamas in the West Bank, overthrowing the Hamas administration there, launching massive round-ups of Hamas activists, and seizing control of Hamas institutions such as schools, hospitals, mosques and charities. If anything was a coup, this was; and yet it is justified as a response to the supposed coup in Ghazzah, and as the restoration of law and order when in fact it was supporters of Abbas that had been responsible for the lack of security in the West Bank.

Since June 2007 Palestine has been divided into two wings, with

Hamas in charge of Ghazzah and Abbas ruling the West Bank through an unconstitutional administration headed by Salam Fayyad that has never been approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council. The experiences of the two areas have been very different. While Ghazzah has been subjected to an international economic blockade, in an attempt to starve its people into submission, defined as rejecting the leadership of Hamas, Abbas has been given all sorts of economic and political support in the West Bank, so he can demonstrate to the Palestinian people the prosperity and security that can be theirs if only they would submit to the US-Israeli writ.

And yet, despite the severe economic hardship in Ghazzah, and the attempts of opponents of Hamas to take advantage to undermine the Hamas government, the people of Ghazzah have refused to break. Showing characteristic resourcefulness, they have found ingenious ways to survive, while generally remaining supportive of the Hamas government and its leaders; while in the West Bank, the undoubted economic and social benefits of Abbas's collaboration with Israel have not persuaded people that his approach is correct. Instead, despite the suppression of Hamas and its supporters, there is widespread anger in the West Bank at the plight of their fellow Palestinians in Ghazzah, and at the fact that democratic political institutions of the PA have been subverted into a virtual police state run by Mahmoud Abbas far more repressively than the PA was ever run under Yasser Arafat.

The current stalemate in Palestine

As noted at the beginning of this booklet, the Palestinian struggle goes through phases defined by major events. The schism of June 2007 is perhaps the latest of these; as on so many occasions in the past, it is now becoming clear that the US-Israeli strategy of which it was a part has failed. Ghazzah has not collapsed under the international economic blockade, Hamas has not been thrown out by a hungry and angry populace, and in the West Bank, Abbas has failed to legitimise his authoritarian rule by the benefits it has brought some of the Palestinians of the area.

Where the Palestinians will go from here remains to be seen. Problems in Ghazzah remain a possibility, as Israel tightens its starvation blockade even further, although international public opinion may make this impossible to sustain. But it now seems clear that most Palestinians will never accept Abbas's regime in the West Bank as legitimate. However, the experience of the rest of the Arab world suggests that it is quite possible for regimes widely regarded as dictatorial and authoritarian to survive for years or decades nonetheless, particularly with the support of Western powers. However, Abbas's problem is that the outside powers currently supporting him expect services in return — concessions on key Palestinian demands — that

the Palestinian people are unlikely to accept without protest. What form these protests will take, and what their political implications will be, remain to be seen; but it would be surprising if they did not involve the emergence and leadership of an Islamic movement like Hamas, considering both the success and popularity that Islamic movements have had in the West Bank in the past.

For Hamas, as Khalid Mishaal has made clear in a number of recent interviews (eg. in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Spring and Summer 2008 issues), the immediate political priority is the re-unification of Palestine, ending the schism between Ghazzah and the West Bank, as a prerequisite to continuing the struggle against zionism and for the restoration of the inalienable rights of the Palestinians. Whether and how that can be achieved remains to be seen.

What is clear, however, is that the Palestinians' will to resist cannot be broken, and that whenever the Israelis try to pen them in one way, they break out another way, whether through popular uprising or by political resistance. And what is also clear is that whatever the next defining event of the Palestinian struggle may prove to be, it will almost certainly involve Hamas or another popular, legitimate and clear-thinking Islamic movement like it.

Hamas: towards a two-state solution?

From its formal announcement shortly after the launch of the first *intifada* in 1987 — some time after it had actually been established by Shaikh Ahmad Yassin and other politically-oriented members of Palestine’s Islamic movement and Islamically-oriented Palestinian activists — a key element of Hamas’s appeal has been its clear position that Israel is a colonial settler state that has no right to exist and will have to be dismantled sooner or later. As Yasser Arafat and the PLO began talks and political cooperation with Israel in the early 1990s, based implicitly on a two-state solution similar to that originally proposed by the UN in 1949, Hamas appeared steadfast in its demand for the liberation of the whole of Palestine “between the river and the sea”.

The Israeli abuse of the peace process throughout the 1990s, constantly making more and more demands of the Palestinians while expanding their own settlements in the West Bank to change the realities on the ground in their own favour, caused many Palestinians and their supporters to lose faith in the two-state concept, and conclude that a one-state solution — whether a secular democratic state as envisioned by some, or an Islamic state as argued by Hamas and supporters in the Islamic movement elsewhere — is in fact the only

viable solution to the Zionist problem. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that over time Hamas appears to have moved in the opposite direction, gradually coming to accept the logic of the two-state solution in their political statements and objectives.

For example, in the election manifesto issued in 2005, before the January 2006 elections, Hamas talked entirely in terms of the liberation of the lands occupied by the Israelis in 1967, apparently accepting the logic of the Oslo peace process. In a letter to UN secretary general Kofi Annan in April 2006, Mahmoud al-Zahhar, foreign minister in Hamas's new government, declared that his government was willing to live "side-by-side" with its "neighbours", based on a two-state solution. In a detailed interview published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in the spring of 2008, Khalid Mishaal gave a clear outline of a two-state solution as Hamas's objective:

There is an opportunity to deal with this conflict in a manner different from the way Israel and, behind it, the United States are dealing with it today. There is an opportunity to achieve a Palestinian national consensus on a political program based on the 1967 borders, and this is an exceptional circumstance, in which most Palestinian forces, including Hamas, accept a state. This was specified in the National Conciliation Document. A state on, and not within, the 1967 borders. On the borders of 4 June 1967, including Jerusalem, [and] the right of return, with full sovereignty, and without settlements. There is also an Arab consensus on this demand, and this is a historic situation. But no one is taking advantage of this opportunity. Even this minimum, which has been accepted by the Palestinians and the Arabs, has been rejected by Israel and the United States.

If anyone thinks that the conflict can be ended, and that calm, stability, and security can be achieved in the region at the expense of Palestinian rights, they are deluded. The Palestinian and Arab people have already proved that whatever their internal divisions and the power imbalance, Israel and America are not capable of imposing their agenda upon us. They failed in Iraq, they failed in Lebanon, and

they failed in Palestine. If they want to deal with this conflict differently, they have only one alternative, which is to accept Palestinian and Arab rights.

This can be interpreted in two ways; and it is impossible to know at this stage which is the case. Either Hamas has made a major — indeed, fundamental — concession in its transition from militant resistant movement to political leadership with responsibilities to deal with the day-to-day international issues facing the Palestinians; in which case some of the fears raised when Hamas members were debating whether or not to enter politics have proved to have been justified.

Alternatively, Hamas may be calling Israel's bluff. Hamas, and most Palestinians, have always believed that Israel and the US are not serious about a two-state solution; hence their constant undermining of the peace process even as they accuse the Palestinians of not being serious about it. By accepting a two-state solution provided that the Palestinian state is genuinely independent, includes the whole of the West Bank, Ghazzah and East Jerusalem, and that the Palestinians fundamental rights are recognised, as state by Mishaal above, Hamas may be aiming to force Israel to expose its own rejection of a two-state solution, thus justifying continued Palestinian resistance.

This need not be an entirely pragmatic political move. Hamas has long proposed a temporary *hudna* (truce) with Israel, of periods varying from 10-30 years, to enable the Palestinians to normalise their lives in the West Bank and Ghazzah while not carrying resistance into 1948 Palestine; this was proposed by Shaikh Yassin himself in the mid-1990s. The acceptance of a two-state solution, while not conceding the fundamental point that Israel is an illegitimate settler state built on Palestinian land, can be seen as an extension of such a proposal, leaving the question of whether and how to fight for

Palestinian rights to future generations of Palestinians.

One thing can be said with certainty, however, based on the experience of the last few years and the courage and determination shown by the Palestinians in the struggle for freedom and justice to date; that is that if Hamas do make the mistake of genuinely settling for a two-state solution, they will lose the support of Muslim Palestinians committed to the liberation of the whole of their land as surely as Fatah and the PLO lost it.

Hamas's rise and success — as its leaders must surely know — has been based above all on its steadfast representation of the genuine aspirations of the Palestinian people. If, unlikely as it may seem, Hamas leaders make the error of moving away from that representation for pragmatic reasons under political pressure from Israel and the international community that supports it, they will inevitably face precisely what the PLO and Fatah faced in the 1990s: the emergence of a new Islamic movement genuinely representing the aspirations of the Palestinian people, to which the Palestinians will transfer their support and allegiance, and which will therefore emerge as the new vanguard of the Palestinian struggle, rendering irrelevant all those who preceded it.

Since the establishment of the Zionist state of Israel in occupied Palestine in 1947, the history of Palestinian resistance to Zionism has gone through a number of phases punctuated by a series of major, defining events. Perhaps the two most recent such events have been the schism between Gaza and the West Bank, governed by Hamas and Fatah respectively, in June 2007; and before that the Hamas victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 2006, which confirmed Hamas's supplanting of the PLO as the leading political movement among Palestinians.

This booklet, published on the occasion of Yaum al-Quds in Ramadan 1429AH (September 2008), discusses the history and rise of Hamas, where the Palestinian struggle stands at the moment, and where it might go from here.

Cover photograph: Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh being hailed by supporters at a mosque in Gaza in September 2006.