

The Struggle for Al-Quds



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Foreword: the centrality of Al-Quds and the insight of Imam Khomeini

Al-Quds (Jerusalem) lies at the heart of Islam and the Islamic movement. Masjid al-Aqsa was the first *qibla* of the Muslims until the direction of prayer was changed by a revelation from Allah to the Prophet, upon whom be peace, during the first year of the *hijrah*. It is also significant because it was from Masjid al-Aqsa that the Prophet went on *mi'raj* after he was transported at night from Masjid al-Haram in Makkah to al-Quds (al-Qur'an 17:1). Muslims took possession of Masjid al-Aqsa and Palestine in the fifteenth year of the *hijrah* (638CE), after which time — except for a brief period when the Crusaders occupied it between 1099 and 1187CE — it remained under Muslim control until the British colonialists arrived in the heartland of Islam in 1918. By political intrigue, and in league with the tribal chiefs of Arabia, the British engineered the defeat of the Uthmaniyyah *khilafah*, leading to the dismemberment of the Ummah into small and weak nation-States. When the British colonialists finally left, Palestine was handed over to the zionist colonialists from Europe.

During the Muslim administration of al-Quds, both the Jews and Christians enjoyed complete religious freedom; their places of worship were respected and protected. The Crusaders, on the other hand, permitted neither Muslims nor Jews any such freedom; the Jews were not even allowed to enter al-Quds. Since the zionist occupation of Palestine and al-Quds, religious persecution and desecration of places of worship have again become the norm. Both Muslims and Christians have suf-

ferred the zionists' brutality and persecution.

We need to consider how Muslims ended up in this sorry state, but first a little digression is necessary. The zionist occupation of Palestine was preceded not only by the dismemberment of the Ummah but by the injection of the poison of nationalism, a concept totally alien to the Qur'anic concept of the Ummah, the single faith community, into the body politic of Islam. It was the ideology of nationalism—Arab nationalism to be precise—that fragmented the Muslims when they were confronted by zionist nationalism in a conflict over control of Palestine. This was inevitable; Arab nationalism was alien to the ethos of the Muslims masses; they could only be mobilized on the basis of Islam, not on the basis of an alien ideology imported from the West. Zionist nationalism, on the other hand, was merely a convenient cover to maintain Western imperial control over a key part of the heartland of Islam. This explains why it continues to enjoy the full backing of the colonial powers.

The Western powers pursued a long-term strategy; they first defeated the Uthmaniyyah khilafah, and then planted their agents in the fragmented body of the Ummah in the Middle East. Muslims ended up with such rulers as Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in the Arabian peninsula, Abdullah ibn Husain in Jordan and Faisal ibn Husain, first in Syria and then in Iraq. These traitors, who were nurtured by the colonialist powers and are therefore loyal to them, were given crumbs for helping to break up the Ummah. When these dictatorships were created, their primary purpose was — as it remains to this day — to protect the zionist state of Israel that was established in Palestine. David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, candidly admitted that the Arab regimes are "Israel's first line of defence." This is true in more ways than one. These regimes have continued to suppress the Islamic movement, the only vehicle capable of mobilizing the Muslim masses against foreign invaders; and they have fed their populations a steady diet of Arab nationalism to keep Islam at bay. Subservience to the West is a fundamental policy of all these regimes.

It was in this grim situation that the Islamic Revolution succeeded in Iran in 1979. Soon thereafter, Imam Khomeini, as the first truly Islamic leader to emerge in the Ummah in the post-colonial period, took a number of decisions that had far-reaching implications. The zionists, who had maintained an embassy in Tehran during the Shah's regime, and

had close relations with the Shah's repressive institutions, were expelled from Iran. The Islamic State severed all links with the Zionist state and handed over the property previously occupied by the Zionists to the Palestinians. The Imam then proclaimed that only the mobilization

Imam Khomeini proclaimed that only the mobilization of the Muslim masses would liberate the first qibla of Islam from the clutches of Zionism, [and] located the symbol of this struggle in the very roots of Islam, the month of Ramadan...

of the Muslim masses would liberate the first *qiblah* of Islam from the clutches of Zionism. Towards this end, he declared that the last Friday of Ramadan should be marked as Yaum al-Quds, the Day of al-Quds, on which Muslims throughout the world should reaffirm their determination and commitment to end the continued occupation of Al-Quds and Palestine by the Zionist invaders.

Imam Khomeini did not appeal to the Palestinians to rise up on the basis of Arab or Palestinian nationalism; nor did he call for the regimes in the Muslim world to pool their resources to liberate al-Quds. Imam Khomeini located the struggle of the Muslim masses in the very roots of Islam, in the month of Ramadan

when Muslims worldwide fast together from sunrise to sunset. Ramadan is also significant as the month of the Qur'an; it was in this month that the Qur'an was first sent from the Lawh-e Mahfuz (the Well-guarded Tablet); then the first ayaat were revealed to the noble Messenger of Allah (*saw*) in the Cave of Hira. The revelation of the Qur'an unfolded over the next 23 years until its completion, but what is significant is that the first revelations occurred in this month.

Ramadan is also the month of struggle; it was in Ramadan that the Muslims fought their first battle, Badr, culminating in a resounding victory; it was also in Ramadan that Makkah was liberated from the clutches of the *mushrikeen*. It was therefore highly appropriate that Imam Khomeini should place the symbol of the struggle for the liberation of Palestine and al-Quds in this month. Since Yaum al-Quds was first proclaimed, Muslims worldwide have observed this day, drawing attention to the sacrilege of Zionist vandalism and desecration of Islam's first *qiblah*, as well as their continued occupation of Palestine and their

repression of the Palestinian people.

As recipients and purveyors of Allah's final message, Muslims are the only people who can grant and guarantee the freedoms of all peoples—be they Jews, Christians or others. Only Muslims recognize the earlier faiths and Prophets; indeed, they are all also Prophets of Islam, and belief in their missions is an article of faith for all Muslims.

By observing the day of al-Quds, Muslims not only begin to fulfil a political obligation, they also acknowledge a religious obligation. The protection of Islam's sacred places is a duty that is incumbent upon all Muslims. As long as al-Quds remains in the clutches of zionism, this duty remains unfulfilled, and mobilizing the Muslim Ummah toward this objective becomes a religious obligation.

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Ramadan 1426AH (October 2005CE).

Introduction: the problem of Israel

The state of Israel proclaimed by zionist leaders on May 15, 1948, emerged from a combination of international politics and military conquest in the aftermath of the Second World War. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly — dominated by the imperial powers that won the war — voted to partition Palestine, which had been ruled by the British since the defeat of the Uthmaniyya *khilafah* in the First World War, 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.

This was clearly unacceptable to the Palestinians and other Arabs, who regarded the UN General Assembly vote as an imperialist irrelevance. As protests broke out in Jerusalem and other areas of Palestine, zionist leaders were already planning how to expand the territory allotted to them. Their strategy was characterised by the terrorisation of Arab communities and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian towns and villages (see box, p. 11). The armies of neighbouring Arab countries, which intervened to support the Palestinians, proved woefully inadequate compared to the well-armed and well-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, which area has come to be known as the West Bank, and Egypt in control of the coastal area around the city of Ghazzah, which area has come to be known as the Ghazzah strip.

Israel's history since its aggressive and bloody genesis reflects its origins in a European racist-nationalist movement of the same sort as those that wrought such chaos in European history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries...

Israel's history since its aggressive and bloody genesis reflects its origins as a European racist-nationalist movement of the same sort as those that wrought such chaos in European history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Zionism emerged in central Europe at a time when the continent was dominated by nationalist movements proclaiming their racial superiority over other peoples and demanding political domination over as much territory as possible. (Ironically perhaps, another equally appalling consequence of the same historical trend was the Nazi movement in Germany.)

This was also a time when European states, including new nation-states such as Germany and Italy, were joining the imperial contest for control over lands in the non-European world, and European settlers were routinely moving to take control over areas of Asia and Africa. As secular European Jews came to see themselves as a nation without a territorial base, and indeed a nation increasingly unwelcome in a Europe defined by other nationalisms, the colonial imperialist model offered itself as an alternative. Although zionists initially suggested that Jews settle in Africa or South America, the Jews' traditional remembrance of their ancient historical roots led to their nationalist-colonialist impulses focussing on lands that had subsequently been populated by Arabs and ruled by Muslims for hundreds of years. This was despite the fact that orthodox and religious Jews, including Jews already living peaceably in Palestine under Muslim rule, initially opposed political zionism, as a tiny minority continue to do to this day.

In Europe, the Jews fell victim to appalling atrocities, culminating in genocide, perpetrated by nationalists who regarded themselves as

The zionists' ethnic-cleansing of Palestine in 1948

The name of Deir Yassin is known throughout the world. In three days in April 1948, zionist militias rampaged through the village, killing hundreds of Palestinians. But it is only the best known of numerous similar zionist terrorist attacks on Palestinians at the time. Although Israelis and their supporters minimise the Deir Yassin atrocity, saying that it has been exaggerated and was simply a tragedy of war, it was in fact clearly part of a strategy designed to force Palestinians from their homes and lands.

After the Deir Yassin massacre, zionist sound trucks roamed other Arab areas warning "unless you leave your homes, the fate of Deir Yassin will be your fate." The result was that some 700,000 Palestinians fled from the areas conquered by Israel in 1948-49. Over 400 Palestinian villages were destroyed to ensure that their people did not return to them; some 75 percent of Palestinian villages in the areas that the Israelis seized.

Israeli prime ministers have recorded this reality and testified to its importance. David Ben Gurion wrote in his *Rebirth and the Destiny of Israel* that: "Until the British left [May 15, 1948], no Jewish settlement, however remote, was entered or seized by the Arabs, while the Haganah... liberated Tiberia, and Haifa, Jaffa, and Safad... So on the day of destiny, that part of Palestine where the Haganah could operate was almost clear of Arabs."

That this was a strategic goal specifically pursued through terror and fear has been admitted by other zionist leaders. Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli "man of peace" assassinated by a zionist zealot in 1995, admitted ordering in 1948 that "The inhabitants of Lydda [50,000 Palestinians] must be expelled quickly, without attention to age... Implement immediately." Yigal Allon, the head of the Palmach, another major zionist militia, wrote that his movement was driven by "the need to cleanse the upper Galilee of Arabs."

In his book *The Revolt*, Menechem Begin wrote: "Arabs throughout the country... were seized by panic and fled for their lives... Of the 800,000 who lived on the present territory of the state of Israel, only some 165,000 are still there. The political and economic significance of this development can hardly be over-estimated."

inherently superior to their victims. This is a mindset characteristic of modern European nationalisms, as has been seen in numerous nationalist conflicts, notably in the former Yugoslavia barely a decade ago. That the zionists themselves shared similar attitudes towards other peoples is clear from their slogan "a land without a people for a people

without a land”, which implicitly dismissed the indigenous population of Palestine. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that their treatment of Arabs in Palestine should be no better than the treatment they themselves suffered in Europe. It has become a part of Zionist propaganda and mythology that the Jews

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came to Palestine willing to live with and indeed improve the lives of the Palestinians if only the Palestinians had been willing to live alongside the Jews. The reality is very different, as numerous Israeli sources themselves testify.

In 1948-49, the Zionists in Palestine drove over 700,000 Palestinians out of the lands they seized. Similar impulses have driven Israeli expansionism and the settler movements in Ghazzah and the West Bank since then. The fact that Israeli settlements have recently been withdrawn from Ghazzah (August 2005) should not obscure the fact that settlements are continuing to be expanded in the West Bank. In September 2005,

when leaving Israel for the UN summit in New York, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon told reporters that “Building is continuing there [the West Bank]. We will build as much as we need.” Defence minister Shaul Mofaz had said the day before that “We have to make every effort to direct resources to the development of the settlement blocs.” And in every area that the Israelis have taken under their control, the Palestinian people have been subjected to the brutal and inhuman treatment that has been a characteristic of ultranationalist and fascist movements throughout modern history.

Their treatment of the Palestinians apart, the Israeli presence in the Middle East has also been a major disruptive factor in terms of regional geopolitics, with a long record of aggression against neighbouring countries. In 1956, Israel co-operated with the British and French in their attempted invasion of Egypt after Gamal Abul Nasser’s regime nationalised the Suez Canal. Israeli troops invaded Ghazzah and the Sinai peninsula but were forced to evacuate them under international pressure at the end of the war. The war of 1967 was provoked by

Palestinian refugees and the right of return

In 1948-49 over 700,000 Palestinians were driven from the lands occupied by the Zionists, while about 150,000 remained as second-class citizens in the new state of Israel. The majority of these fled to the West Bank, which came under Jordanian rule. Until this time, the West Bank itself was relatively sparsely populated compared to the areas occupied by the Zionists. The West Bank itself was invaded and occupied by Israel in 1967, along with the Ghazzah Strip, which had previously been ruled by Egypt and was also the home of many Palestinian refugees. Both these areas became the target of intensive settler activity, with the result that many Palestinians, particularly in the West Bank, were driven from their homes for a second time.

Today there are about 7 million Palestinians, the vast majority of whom are refugees or internally-displaced persons; a third of all refugees in the world are Palestinian. About 3 million Palestinians remain in Palestine as a whole. Of these, about 700,000 live in Israel; about 1.2 million live in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, including 200,000 in East Jerusalem; and about a million live in the Ghazzah Strip. Many of those who remain within 1948 Palestine are internally displaced. The rest of the Palestinians live in other Arab countries and around the world, although the majority of these still live within 100km of the borders of the Israeli-occupied territories from which they were forced to flee, and which they regard as home.

While some Palestinians have done well in their new lives — they are known as an intelligent and hard-working people, and have the highest per capita rate of university graduates of any Arab people — all are aware of the suffering of their brothers and sisters under Israeli rule or living in refugee camps, and identify with the Palestinian struggle for the liberation of their homeland. They are also deeply aware that they are a people displaced from their homes by injustice and force, and are determined to assert their right to return. Many Palestinian families still have the keys of the homes they were forced to flee, decades after their villages were destroyed and their lands built over by Israeli settlers.

The inalienable right of refugees to return to their homes is enshrined in international law, and firmly demanded by Palestinians wherever they may be. This is utterly unacceptable to the Israelis, who continue to do everything they can to force Palestinians from the areas they rule, particularly Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. They also demand that the Palestinians surrender their claims to a right of return as part of the “peace process”. This is unacceptable to Palestinians, and is one of the main obstacles to the prospect of any negotiated settlement in Palestine.

months of Israeli sabre-rattling against Syria in particular, which prompted Syria to fear it was about to be invaded, a suspicion bolstered by Soviet intelligence reports that Israeli troops were massing near the Syrian border. Egypt moved troops into Sinai to support Syria, and as the diplomatic temperature rose, the Israelis launched what they called

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“pre-emptive strikes” against Egypt, Syria and Jordan. In the resulting war, which Israel stubbornly maintains was one of self-defence, Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan, the Ghazzah Strip and the Sinai peninsula from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria. In 1978, Israel invaded Lebanon for the first time, supporting its favoured Christian militias in the country’s civil war. In 1982, they invaded again, occupying the whole of the south of the country, massacring Palestinian refugees, and besieging Beirut, causing massive casualties and devastating the country. This was when the Hizbullah emerged as the major Islamic movement in Lebanon,

forcing the Israelis to withdraw from much of the south of the country in 1985, and eventually from the rest of the country, except the Shabaa area. Major wars apart, Israel has also been involved in political interference in other countries, terrorism and other disruptive activities, all the while maintaining stubbornly that it was itself under attack and claiming that it was acting only in self-defence.

From the very beginning of their existence, the Zionist movement and the state of Israel have enjoyed the support of major western powers and so have been able to get away with appalling crimes. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, by which Britain committed itself to support the establishment of a “Jewish homeland” in Palestine, despite the fact that Jews then constituted only a tiny minority of the area’s population, was only the beginning. Throughout the period of British rule, Jews were allowed to move to Palestine despite the wishes of the local population. In 1947, the UN General Assembly granted the Jews by far the larger and more important part of Palestinian territory, despite the fact that the Zionists were already engaged in terrorist activities against both the

British authorities and the Arab population in Palestine. This was specifically on the understanding that more Jews would move to Palestine in due course. Subsequently, Israel has always enjoyed Western support for its actions, however illegal and aggressive .

This Western support is often explained as a consequence of Western guilt over Europe's long history of anti-semitism, particularly the suffering of the Jews under the Nazis, but that is only a partial explanation. A number of other considerations may be more significant. Initially, it was certainly true that many in the West, with its traditional anti-semitism, were glad to see the Jews moving out and settling someplace else. It was also a factor that the Jews were seen as a civilised, European people that Westerners could identify with, while the Arabs were simply natives like the ones that had been causing all imperial powers so much trouble for so many years. Western powers themselves assumed the right to rule India and Algeria, for example, so it appeared perfectly reasonable to them that Jewish European settlers should want and be entitled to establish themselves in Palestine. Another factor was that the Jews had come to be seen, in some circles, as allies of the Christian Europeans against their traditional enemies, the Muslims of the Middle East. Increasingly too, as the balance of power among Western imperial powers changed, and the US became more important after the Second World War, Israel came to be seen as an important ally in the region, both against the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War, and in terms of the US's increasing interest in maintaining long-term control over the region's oil resources, particularly as Islamic movements have presented serious challenges to Western neo-colonial hegemony over the region.

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The zionists, for their part, have proved remarkably adept at exploiting all these considerations to ensure that official western support for them does not wane, even as many ordinary people in Western countries have

become increasingly aware of Israel's true nature and the criminal reality behind their carefully cultivated propaganda facade. Exploiting the memory of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, in the name of ensuring that nothing like that can ever happen again, is a major part of this process; something that sits ill with Israel's own treatment of the Palestinian people, and its history of allying with the apartheid regime in South Africa, Hindu nationalists in India and fascist groups and regimes in Latin America and other places. Perhaps more significant, however, is the role of wealthy and politically-influential Jewish communities and interests in all Western countries, but the US in particular. The fact that the Israeli interest has come to be seen as inseparable from the national interest in the US, for example, is now recognised as problematic by a significant minority of the American people, but is something that they are powerless to do anything about, given the Jewish-Israeli influence over the political institutions and processes in the country.

Challenging Israel's right to exist is one of the great taboos of modern Western discourse, automatically equated with anti-semitism. The reality, however, is that zionism and the zionist state are bound to go the way of other fascistic regimes and colonial settler states...

From its very genesis, therefore, the zionist movement has been inseparably linked with both European ultra-nationalism, a phenomenon that has come to be seen as anachronistic and unacceptable in Europe itself, and Western colonial imperialism. At a time when fascism has become a dirty word, when the Serbian example has discredited extreme nationalism, zionism today is perhaps the last ultranationalist movement whose crimes are tolerated and justified. Colonial imperialism, for its part, was on the wane even as Israel was created in the heart of the Muslim world after the Second World War; it was replaced by economic and political neo-imperialism. (America's increasingly direct intervention in foreign countries, notably Afghanistan and Iraq, in recent years is better seen as an evolution of neo-imperialism rather than a return to colonialism.)

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Western discourse, automatically equated with anti-semitism. The reality, however, is that zionism and the zionist state are bound to go the way of other fascistic regimes and colonial settler states. Objectively speaking — setting aside Jewish religious claims, which many orthodox Jews reject and non-Jews can hardly be expected to accept — the zionists have no more right to dominate Palestine, at the expense of the indigenous population, than the British had to rule India or the French to rule Algeria. Of course, the processes of decolonisation in both India and Algeria were traumatic and bloody; but in hindsight no one doubts that they were necessary and inevitable. In both cases, much of the trauma was caused by the colonialists' refusal to accept the inevitable. It is similarly inevitable that the zionist state will in due course be abolished and replaced by a state reflecting the faith, values and aspirations of the majority of the indigenous Palestinian population. What remains to be seen is the process and timescale through which this inevitability unfolds; it is unlikely to be soon, considering the support that the zionists enjoy from the world's leading imperial power at this time, and it is unlikely to be smooth, given the zionists' determination to fight the inevitable, and their proven and oft-demonstrated political cunning and military ruthlessness.

In the meantime, Palestinians concerned with their homeland, and Muslims around the world concerned with both justice for their brethren in Palestine and the fate of al-Quds, a city central to the history of Islam, must do everything possible to limit the damage that the zionists are doing in Palestine and to end the Western imperialist domination of the world, of which the zionist state of Israel is a central part. It is only as part of this broader historical process that the zionist occupation of Palestine will be ended, and al-Quds will be restored to the administration of the only rulers under whom all those who regard it as sacred have been able to enjoy its blessing in peace, prosperity and freedom.

The Palestinian movement: from Arab nationalism to Islam

The Israeli conquest of much of Palestine in 1948-49 shattered the infrastructure of Palestinian society. As Palestinians did not have armed forces to resist the Zionist militias that emerged during the British Mandate period, there was little effective resistance to the Zionist aggression as groups such as Irgun and Haganah moved to drive Palestinians from their country in the period before and after the UN partition plan of 1947. Neighbouring Arab states, all hamstrung to some extent by their dependence and subservience to Western powers, attempted to intervene to protect the Palestinians and prevent the establishment of the Israeli state, but failed dismally. Israel succeeded in seizing 77 percent of Palestinian territory, while the other 23 percent fell under the control of Jordan (the West Bank) and Egypt (the Ghazzah Strip).

Despite this monumental failure on the part of the Arab countries, they remained the main representatives of the Palestinian struggle for the next few years. This was a situation that suited the Israelis, who argued that the Palestinians were simply Arabs who could perfectly well live in any other Arab country instead of demanding to return to their homes in Palestine. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which was to become the mainstay of the Palestinian struggle during the 1970s and 1980s, was founded in East Jerusalem in 1964, as an alliance of refugee groups and local Palestinians brought together by the Arab League. In its early years, it was little more than an instrument of Arab governments, particularly Jordan. However, the dismal failures of Arab

armies in 1967 led to demands for Palestinians to take greater control over the struggle to achieve their rights, rather than leaving its leadership to governments of Arab countries. It was at this time that Yasser Arafat, the Chairman of the Fatah movement, emerged as leader of the

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This was also a time of radical change in the situation of the Palestinian population. At the end of the 1949 war, some 150,000 Palestinians had been left under Israeli rule, while the great majority had become refugees in the West Bank and Ghazzah Strip, areas that had come under Jordanian and Egyptian rule respectively. Jordan had annexed the West Bank in 1950 and granted citizenship to all its inhabitants.

In 1967, however, Israel occupied both these territories, along with the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. For the first time, Israel ruled areas in which Palestinians were the overwhelming majority. This fact, combined with the emergence of the PLO, completely changed the focus of the Palestinian struggle. Although Israelis now claim that their repression of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Ghazzah is a reaction to the two *intifadas*, the reality is that they instituted severely repressive rule from the outset. Under the military establishment, Israel instituted numerous practices, from political and judicial harassment to administrative measures, designed to make life intolerable for the areas' Palestinians, in the hope of forcing more and more of them to leave the territories, as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had been forced to leave their homes in 1948-49.

Palestinians were denied all basic political rights and civil liberties, including the freedoms of expression, press and political association. Palestinian nationalism was criminalized, and numerous routine Palestinian cultural practices were regulated for no reason other than

to make life difficult for ordinary people. This went to the extreme of banning the collection of za'tar (wild thyme), a basic element in Palestinian cuisine. Over time, the Zionists developed an extensive portfolio of strategies to harass the Palestinians and pursue their own interests,

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ests, from collective punishments such as curfews, house demolitions and the closure of roads, to the random destruction of houses, villages and orchards. Palestinian leaders and activists have been subject to random arrest and deportation or imprisonment. At least 300,000 Palestinians have been imprisoned without trial since 1967, and over half a million tried in Israeli military courts. Dozens of people have died in detention, many of them under torture.

The other element of the Israeli strategy in the West Bank in particular has been the relaunch of the settler movement, as the government encouraged Zionists to move into the West Bank and Ghazzah in order to change its demographic balance.

Hundreds of settlements have been built on land seized from Palestinians, and hundreds of thousands of Jews settled in the West Bank and Ghazzah. In order to service these settlers, roads and other elements of social and economic infrastructure have been built, specifically designed to exclude Palestinians. Although Israel withdrew its settlements from Ghazzah in August 2005, it continues to expand them in the West Bank. These plans are explained as "creating new realities on the ground", realities that the Israelis expect will be irreversible; an expectation encouraged by the international community's utter failure to rein in Israeli excesses and illegalities over the years.

The PLO's approach to the liberation of Palestine, like that of the Arab governments that preceded it, was based on nationalism. Where the Arab governments had appealed to Arab nationalism, the PLO focussed more on Palestinian nationalism. It initially operated primarily out of Jordan in the 1960s, until the rise of Palestinian nationalism in a coun-

try with a massive Palestinian population worried Jordan's Hashemite monarchy and it cracked down on the PLO in 1970-71. The PLO then moved to Lebanon, where it became a party in the civil war that began in 1975. In 1982, after the Israeli invasion and the massacres of Palestinian refugees, the PLO leadership was forced to move again, to Tunisia. Throughout this period, the PLO tried to operate at the level of international politics, appealing to the UN, the US and international institutions to try to reverse Israel's illegalities and grant Palestinians their rights.

Israel's response was to dismiss the PLO as a terrorist organization and to deal instead with those it felt it could manipulate more easily. It insisted, therefore, that the Palestinian issue was an Arab issue that it would only discuss with Arab states. It was encouraged in this by the fact that there were increasing tensions between Arab governments and the PLO, as indicated by events in Jordan. Immediately after coming to power in Egypt in 1970, Anwar Sadat privately indicated his willingness to sign a peace agreement with Israel in return for the Sinai Peninsula; it was after this overture was ignored that the Egyptians and Syrians attacked Israel in 1973, aiming to recapture the territories they had lost in 1967. This war was followed by further Arab attempts overtures towards Israel, which were again rejected.

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In 1977 Sadat began the private approaches to Israel that culminated in the meeting with US president Jimmy Carter and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin at Camp David. These talks formed the basis of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signed in 1979, which led to Egypt's isolation from the rest of the Arab world. The Camp David agreements included proposals for limited autonomy for Palestinians in the West Bank and Ghazzah, but these were never pursued as they were unacceptable to the Palestinians as they did not include a full Israeli withdrawal. Israel also did nothing to halt its settlement activities, as it had

promised at Camp David. Sadat's decision to make a separate peace with Israel was regarded as a betrayal by Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims around the world and resulted in his assassination in October 1981.

Meanwhile, those Palestinians inside Palestine were facing the realities of Israeli rule and developing their own political institutions and movements. These were rooted in their faith and inspired by Islamic movement in other countries, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran...

While Palestinian and Arab nationalists were trying to address the problem of Israel at the international political level, Palestinians in occupied Palestine were facing the realities of Israeli rule on a daily basis. There was growing frustration with both the PLO and Arab governments, and local community organizations were developing their own popular political institutions and movements. While the Palestinian political leadership outside Palestine was predominantly nationalist in outlook, the new organizations in the Palestinian territories were more rooted in the values of ordinary Palestinian people, notably those of Islam, and inspired by Islamic movements in other Muslim countries, particularly the success of

the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1978-79. It was these developments inside occupied Palestine which provided the basis for the total change in the nature of the Palestinian struggle which came with the *intifada* (Uprising) in 1987.

The zionist threat to the Haram al-Sharif

One result of the zionist occupation of al-Quds in 1967 was that the Haram al-Sharif, the third-holiest site in Islam, came under the rule of the zionists after Jordanian troops, who were supposed to protect it, fled in disarray on June 7. The result was that no *juma* prayers were held there on June 9, the first time they were missed since the Haram's restoration by Salah ul-Din. But the threat was far greater than that; Theodor Herzl, the founder of zionism, said at the first zionist conference in 1897: "If I ever control Jerusalem, I will definitely remove all the holy places except the Jewish ones." This zionist aspiration was emphasised in 1948, when Israeli aircraft bombed the Haram in an attempt to destroy it. The two mosques were hit by a total of 65 bombs, doing considerable damage. Fortunately the bombs available to Israeli forces at the time were relatively small.

Al-Haram al-Sharif is one of the three holiest sites of Islam, along with the Ka'aba in Makkah and the Prophet's mosque in Madinah. It was the first *qiblah* of Islam, until the Qur'anic revelation after the *hijrah*, by which the qibla was transferred to the Ka'aba. It was also the site of the Prophet's ascension to the Heavens after his Night Journey from Makkah to Jerusalem (al-Isra'a and al-Mi'raj).

Al-Haram al-Sharif is a rectangular area located in the south-east of the old city of Jerusalem. It is enclosed by a wall with eleven gates, of which seven are open and four closed. It is also connected to other parts of the city by traditional paths. Within the Haram there are 25 drinking-water

wells and numerous fountains. The Haram has four minarets and several domes and porches. There are also two sundials. The two buildings within the Haram are the Dome of the Rock in the centre of the Haram and the Masjid al-Aqsa. (The name al-Aqsa is also used to refer to the Haram as a whole.) Both were built by the Umayyad king Abdul-Malik ibn Marwan, the Dome in 68-72AH (688-691CE) and the Masjid al-Aqsa in 692-705CE. This should not be confused with the mosque built earlier by Omar ibn Al-Khattab, the second rightly-guided *khalifah*, which was on the east side of the Haram.



The Masjid al-Aqsa at the Haram al-Sharif in al-Quds. The golden dome commonly identified with the Haram is the Dome of the Rock.

The Jews claim the site is 'Temple Mount', saying it was the site of a temple built by 'King David' (the Prophet Dawud (*as*)) which was the centre of the Jewish faith. The site had a long and chequered history before the coming of Islam, being repeatedly demolished and restored under Persian and Roman rule. The Zionists claim that the al-Buraq wall, the south-western part of Al-Haram Al-Sharif, being 47 metres long, is part of the external wall of the temple. It is this which is known as the 'wailing wall'. The Zionist dream is to demolish al-Haram al-Sharif and build a new temple in its place.

Even before the creation of the Zionist state, the Zionists had started moving against the Haram. The most important episode was in 1929, when Jews tried to take over the wall again on August 15 (there had been numerous previous attempts, notably in September 1928) and were again resisted by Muslims. The following day was a Friday, and demonstrations spread through the country, lasting until the end of the month. The British authorities carried out a thorough investigation and

ruled that the wall was part of the Haram and should be controlled by the Muslims.

After the Zionists captured the city in 1967, control of the wall passed to them. Since then, the issue has been about control of the rest of the Haram. Although it is officially administered by Muslim authorities, it is effectively under Jewish control, for no Muslim may enter without passing through their security and getting their permission. But their longer-term ambition remains to take it over totally, and ultimately to demolish it and build a Jewish temple in its place. This ambition has been compared to the Hindu campaign to replace mosques in India with Hindu temples, and in many cases the strategies followed have been similar. Of course, the significance and implications of the Jewish plots against the Haram are even more serious than those of the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and other Indian mosques.

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These plots began immediately the city was captured. Israeli major-general Uzi Narkis, commander of the Israeli troops in the area when the city was captured, later revealed that the army's chief rabbi, Shlomo Goren, had suggested using the fighting as a cover for destroying the Dome of the Rock. The Israeli daily Ha'aretz quoted Narkis as saying that Goren had said to him: "Uzi, this is the time to get 100kg of explosives inside the Dome of Rock and it will go for once and forever". As in 1948, the idea was to use war as the cover for destroying the mosques. Narkis claimed to have been shocked by the suggestion and to have refused it outright. A likelier explanation is that pragmatic and political minds in Tel Aviv vetoed it for fear of the international outrage it would cause.

In August 1969, two years after the Israeli capture of Jerusalem, the Haram al-Sharif suffered its most serious attack. Denis Michael Rohan,

an Australian Jew, entered the building posing as a tourist. He doused the historic Nur al-Din Zinki Minbar in a flammable liquid and set fire to it. Some 1,500 cubic metres of the south-eastern part of the Mosque were destroyed, about a third of the mosque's total area. The minbar had been built by Salah ul-Din al-Ayoubi during his restoration of the Haram in 583AH (1197CE), after he had liberated it from the Crusaders. It was later partially restored.

Since then zionist efforts against the Haram have continued. Three major strategies have emerged: attempts to destroy the Sanctuary; attempts to occupy it; and attempts to undermine it physically by excavating tunnels underneath it.

The attack has gone down in official history as the work of a 'lone zealot'. However, the circumstances indicate that this was not the case. It came just three days after a group of zionists had broken into the mosque to pray using their horns, and reciting hymns and carols, as part of a continuing effort to occupy the site. Muslims' efforts to fight the blaze were also hampered. Israeli authorities responded to the attack by cutting water supplies to the area, and fire engines were delayed in attending the scene.

Since then zionist efforts against the Haram have continued. Three major strategies have emerged: attempts to destroy the Sanctuary; attempts to occupy it; and attempts to undermine it physically by excavating tunnels underneath it. Attempts to destroy the mosque have been continued by fundamentalist zionist groups such as the Gush Emunim, which Goren helped to found. There were also several plots discovered around the time of the millennium. A former Israeli police officer, Assaf Hefets, said in August 1999 that extremist Jews affiliated to Gush Emunim and other similar groups were planning to destroy the two mosques and take over the Haram. At about the same time, in a development which may have been linked, police claimed to have foiled a plan by Jewish extremists to rent an apartment overlooking the Haram and fire missiles into the compound during a congregational prayer during Ramadan. Again, the perpetrators' object was to facilitate the destruction of the mosques, as well as of the 'peace process'.

Other plots to destroy the Haram that have come to light include the discovery of a stash of explosives belonging to the followers of rabbi Meir Kahane in May 1980, and the arrest of 49 Jews carrying explosives into the Haram on March 10, 1983. All were released the following day. Following the Israeli capture of al-Haram al-Sharif, and having failed to persuade the army to destroy the Haram, Golen and his followers prayed there to establish the principle that it was Jewish ground 'occupied' by the Muslims. Attempts to enter the Muslim parts of the mosque and perform Jewish rites there have continued ever since.

The Haram has also been the scene of numerous Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, often when Palestinians have protested against Israeli plots against the mosques. Over 60 Palestinians were killed or wounded on April 11, 1982, when an Israeli soldier opened fire on worshippers. In May 1988 about 100 were killed or wounded when troops opened fire on a Palestinian demonstration inside the Haram. And in 1990 Israeli troops killed 22 Palestinians and injured over 200 when Muslims protested against Jews trying to lay a symbolic foundation stone for their temple inside the Haram.

The other major Israeli strategy against the Haram has been to undermine it by opening tunnels running below it in the name of archaeology and science. This strategy was implemented immediately after the Israeli conquest of the old city in 1967, when archaeologists financed by the Hebraic University and led by a university professor excavated under the south wall and the women's mosque. There have been nine major stages since then, all ostensibly for academic reasons or to make facilities easier for Jews visiting the 'wailing wall', but all having the effect of weakening the structures of the Haram. There are now serious concerns about the Haram's structural integrity. The tunnels could also be used in the future for the planting of bombs or mines which would totally destroy the Haram, and which the Zionist state could blame on individual zealots, even though they had made all the preparations themselves.

In September 2000, the current Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon — then leader of the opposition — invaded the Haram al-Sharif with a retinue of over 1000 bodyguards. His stated object was to reassert Zionist sovereignty over the site. It was widely taken by Zionists as a commitment to their hopes of demolishing the Haram and replacing it with a

Jewish temple. The visit prompted the outbreak of the second Palestinian *intifada*, originally known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, among a Palestinian population that had become disillusioned with both the Israelis' duplicity and dishonesty in its dealings with the Palestinians since the Oslo Accords , and the weakness of the Palestinian leadership.

The first Palestinian *intifada* (1987-1992)

In December 1987, Palestinians in the West Bank and Ghazzah spontaneously took to the streets in what became known as the first *intifada* (uprising). While the PLO had been based outside the territories and involved in the political machinations of Arab countries, as well as trying to pursue the Palestinian cause in international politics, ordinary Palestinian people had been confronting the realities of the Israeli occupation, particularly the massive settlement drive that was launched after 1967. Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the PLO, and increasingly angry with Israeli government policy and the abuses of Israeli troops and settlers occupying the territories since 1967, Palestinians took matters into their own hands and confronted the occupying forces directly. The intervention of the Palestinian masses in popular politics marked a major change in the dynamics of the Palestinian struggle.

Over the next five years, the Palestinians of the West Bank and Ghazzah showed their anger at the Israelis in a series of demonstrations, strikes, boycotts of Israeli goods, and general unrest. Militant action was not a major feature of the first *intifada*, as it was to become in the second *intifada* launched in 2000. The Israelis responded brutally on the ground, attacking the Palestinians both militarily and economically. 1,392 Palestinians were killed, according to the Palestinian sources, and over 130,000 injured. Nearly 20,000 were jailed. The economy was devastated as workers went on strike or were prevented from working by Israeli repression; unemployment reached 40-50 percent. Remittances from Palestinians abroad, particularly in the Persian Gulf

states, dried up, partly as a result of the US occupation of the region after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1989. The Palestinian people made massive sacrifices to put pressure on the Israelis through direct resistance to the occupation, but needed their leaders to reap the political benefits of this pressure.

The emergence of the Islamic movement as a significant force in Palestinian affairs posed a major threat to the PLO, which was taken by surprise and appeared in danger of being rendered irrelevant by events on the ground...

Unfortunately, their leaders again proved unable to do this, while the Israelis again showed their remarkable ability — aided considerably by the total support they received from the US and the international community — to manipulate apparently poor positions to their advantage.

Although the *intifada* erupted spontaneously, rather than having been planned, it was not without an organizational basis. Although bodies affiliated with the PLO were active inside Palestine under the Israeli occupation, a feature of the 1970s had been the growth in the influence of the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (the Muslim Brotherhood) and affiliated bodies, under the leadership of Shaikh Ahmad Yassin. He had been active in both the West Bank and Ghazzah since the late 1960s, and in 1973 had established the Mujamma al-Islami (the Islamic Centre) to coordinate political activities in Ghazzah. It was from this trend of Palestinian thought and activism that the impulse for direct resistance against the Israelis emerged. In December 1987, at the very outset of the *intifada*, members of these groups established the Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas) to guide the *intifada*.

The emergence of the Islamic movement as a significant force in Palestinian affairs posed a major threat to the secular, nationalist PLO, which was taken by surprise by the *intifada* and appeared in danger of being rendered irrelevant by events on the ground in Palestine. However, the PLO and its affiliated bodies had considerable profile and credibility, as well as an institutional infrastructure both in Palestine and outside of it. The PLO's reaction to the events had two key elements. One was that its affiliates in Palestine maneuvered themselves

to the head of the *intifada*, establishing the Unified Leadership of the Uprising to co-ordinate activities and maintain communication with the rest of the world, through the PLO headquarters in Tunis. This helped to ensure that the *intifada* was associated with the PLO around the world, although the reality on the ground was very different.

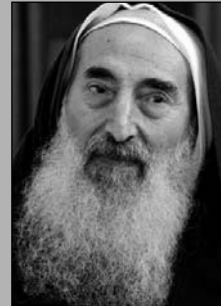
The other key element of the PLO's response was that it adopted a new political agenda designed to take advantage of the pressure that the *intifada* was exerting on Israel. In 1988, the PLO declared the establishment of an independent Palestine in the West Bank and Ghazzah and implicitly accepted a two-state solution to the Israeli problem by accepting the 1947 UN partition plan. It was rewarded by the new Palestinian state being recognised by 104 members of the UN General Assembly, and by the US immediately making discreet overtures towards the PLO leadership and beginning secret talks.

For the Israelis, these developments were exactly what they needed. Faced with an angry Palestinian populace in the occupied territories, and the rise of a popular, militant Islamic movement, the Zionists came in time to realise that the PLO were not so bad after all. Just as they had earlier refused to deal with the PLO, preferring the Arab governments as easier to manipulate, they now turned to the PLO in preference to having to deal with either Hamas or other popular and activist Palestinian groups and leaders inside the country. Having insisted that the PLO be excluded from the Madrid Conference on the future of Palestine, convened by the US in October 1991, Israel itself initiated direct and secret negotiations with the PLO in Oslo in 1992. It was these that resulted in the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles, signed in Washington in September 1993, that can be seen as the end of the *intifada* and which laid the basis for the "peace process" pursued during the rest of the 1990s.

The other key element of the PLO's response was to adopt a new political agenda. In 1988, it declared the establishment of an independent Palestine in the West Bank and Ghazzah and accepted a two-state solution to the Israeli problem.

The emergence and rise of Hamas

Hamas, the Harakah al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement), was formally founded in December 1987, at the outset of the first *intifada*. Its roots, however, lay in the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen and the leadership of Shaikh Ahmad Yassin, an *'alim* associated with the Ikhwan, in the occupied Palestinian territories from the late 1960s onwards. He had started out doing charitable and religious work, and then had established a political group, the Mujamma al-Islami, in Ghazzah in 1973. A militant resistance movement was the natural next step, particularly with the eruption of the *intifada* in 1987.



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

Over the next two decades, Hamas has become arguably the dominant 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. Following the Oslo Accords, Hamas sat back and allowed Yasser Arafat and the PLO to pursue their strategy, confi-

dent 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 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.



Hamas fighters at a rally in Beit Hanoun, north of Ghazzah, in January 2005.

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 Rantisi a month later.

Their failure was confirmed following the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004. Although Arafat's former deputy, Mahmud 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.

Following their withdrawal from Ghazzah, a Hamas stronghold, in August 2005, the Israelis tried to force the PA to prevent Hamas taking part in parliamentary election due to take place in Palestine in January 2006. 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. What the implications of this are will be seen in the next few months but few doubt that Hamas is now a defining element in Palestinian politics.

The Oslo peace process: redefining realities on the ground

The Declaration of Principles signed by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in Washington in September 1993 was supposed to be based on the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO and 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.

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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.

At the same time, Israeli governments of all political hues were engaged in a massive campaign of settlement building, expanding existing settlements, and persuading more Jews, and even non-Jewish immigrants, to settle in the West Bank. These activities were supported by the building of a network of by-pass roads designed to enable settlers

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to move around the occupied territories without having to pass through areas under Palestinian control. In the process, more and more land was confiscated, increasing the pressure on Palestinians to leave Jerusalem and surrounding areas; the heart of Al-Khalil (Hebron), a city of 120,000 people, was given over to 400 settlers; and the areas of the West Bank that the PLO expected to form the basis of a Palestinian state were divided into three separate zones, A, B, and C, which were little more than easily-controllable Bantustans.

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 to make it firmer and less painful for itself. 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 the object of the Camp David talks of July 2000.

Camp David II: a triumph of Israeli political manipulation

The Israelis have proved themselves masters not only of political manipulation to achieve their objectives, but also of creating entirely false images of reality in order to justify their actions and disguise their true nature. They have always been helped in this by the support of Western politicians and international institutions, and the uncritical acceptance of their statements by most of the Western media. The way in which the supposed final status talks between Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak at Camp David in July 2000 were twisted to create the impression of Palestinian intransigence destroying the Oslo peace process is a masterful case in point.

The reality is that the Oslo Accords had been trampled all over by Israeli policies between 1992 and 2000. Having implicitly promised to pull out of the West Bank and Ghazzah in return for Palestinian concessions, the Israelis had instead used settlements and military and transport infrastructures to totally redraw the maps of the two areas. Instead of the whole of the West Bank and Ghazzah, with East Jerusalem as their capital, as implied in the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians were offered 40 percent of the West Bank and 65 percent of the Ghazzah strip, divided into blocks separated by Israeli-controlled military roads, and with Israel controlling their borders and entry points. Israel would not return to its pre-1967 borders, Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem and surrounding areas would be confirmed, and Israel would accept no legal responsibility for the Palestinian refugees. In other words, all the Palestinian demands that were to be discussed at the final status talks were to be settled on Israeli terms. To add insult to injury, Barak and US president Bill Clinton turned the final status negotiations into a take-it or leave-it offer to the Palestinians.

It was, of course, impossible for the Palestinians to accept such terms. Knowing this, Arafat was reluctant even to go to Camp David. He was pressured by Clinton and finally went on condition that it was understood that nothing final would be agreed. Instead, Barak and Clinton presented him with an ultimatum which they trumpeted to the world as a remarkably generous offer. Arafat had no option but to turn it down, and was immediately accused of having scuttled a real chance for peace because of his intransigence and greed. This utterly surreal version of events, which can only be accepted by those who are totally or wilfully ignorant of the real situation, is still treated as reality by many supposedly knowledgeable analysts.

Arafat returned to Palestine humiliated, blamed for killing the Oslo Accords that the Israelis had long since trampled to death. Any lingering hopes of a settlement were gone. Pressure was building that was bound to lead to a new explosion of some sort sooner rather than later.

The Al-Aqsa intifada (2000-2004)

Despite the fact that the deal that Barak offered Arafat at Camp David in July 2000 was designed to be rejected, Barak was severely criticised by other Israelis for being willing to concede too much to the Palestinians. The attack on him was led by Ariel Sharon, the “Butcher of Beirut” who had been responsible for the massacres of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in 1983. He was aiming for power in Israel as the champion of extreme zionism and the settler movement. In September 2000, he demanded the government’s permission to visit the Masjid al-Aqsa specifically to assert Jewish sovereignty over the Haram al-Sharif. On September 28, he invaded the Haram accompanied by a 1,000-strong police bodyguard.

For the Palestinians, this was a provocation and a threat that they could not tolerate, particularly coupled with the massive and intimidating police presence the following day, a Friday. The *juma* prayers were followed by massive protests against the police presence and the Israeli occupation generally. The Israeli authorities, clearly anticipating some Palestinian backlash — and perhaps intending to provoke one — responded with immediate and exceptional brutality, killing dozens of Palestinians in the first few days of what became known as the al-Aqsa *intifada* which was in truth a much wider uprising against Israeli generally.

From the outset, the al-Aqsa *intifada* was very different from the first *intifada*. Unlike in 1987, the Palestinians now had a territorial base from which to operate — the areas ruled by the Palestinian Authority —

and armed and organized forces, including both militant resistance groups such as Hizbullah and Fatah's Al-Aqsa Brigades and the Palestinian Authority's police forces. Although Israel immediately demanded that the Palestinian forces help it to suppress the protests,

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because it had authorised their creation so that Arafat could take over the job of policing Palestinian opposition to Israel, Arafat quickly realized that he could not order his policemen to act against Palestinian protesters simply because they would not obey. In virtually every case where Palestinian policemen found themselves involved in trouble, they sided with the Palestinian people against the Israeli authorities. As in 1987, the Palestinian agenda was set by militant groups outside the official structures; now Hamas emerged as a major factor, setting the standard for militant operations inspired by the example of the Hizbullah in Lebanon. Also as in the first *intifada*, albeit in different circumstances, Arafat found he had no option but to lead the Palestinians down the road they had already decided to take.

The Israelis responded by blaming Arafat personally for the uprising, accusing him of ordering it, and targeting the PA infrastructure as punishment, even as they were demanding that Arafat use it against the militants. Having no political strategy to pursue, they simply piled force on force, reoccupying towns and cities that they had earlier transferred to PA control, inflicting massive suffering on the Palestinian people, and intending simply to crush them into submission. And yet the Palestinians refused to be crushed, as demonstrated by the growing support for Hamas. By 2003, the PA had been virtually destroyed, Arafat was besieged in his presidential compound in Ramallah, and Hamas leaders and activists were being targeted for assassination in an attempt to decapitate the uprising. Even observers sympathetic to the Palestinians questioned the wisdom and point of maintaining the *intifa-*

da, but defenders pointed out that they were succeeding simply because the Israelis could not win. Ironically, Arafat, the man widely criticised among Palestinians for his dealings with the Israelis in the 1990s, as well as the ineffectiveness and corruption of the PA under his leadership, became the symbol of the Palestinian resistance, determinedly holding out in his Ramallah headquarters, old, sick and reportedly targeted for assassination himself. He left it only to move to Paris in November 2005, for medical treatment shortly before his death.

By late 2004, the *intifada* had lost its intensity, with the Palestinians severely battered but still managing to hold the Israelis in a violent stalemate, despite the massive losses suffered. Early in 2005, Palestinian groups agreed a period of calm to allow political developments to advance. The losses suffered by the Palestinians during the *intifada* should not be forgotten, however. A report by the Palestinian National Information Centre in October 2005 revealed that 4,172 Palestinians had been killed since the beginning of the *intifada*, 783 of them children and 269 of them women. It also revealed that 45,718 Palestinians had been injured by Israeli actions, and that about 8,600 children Palestinians remain in Israeli jails, including 1,386 students, 288 children, 205 teachers and 115 women. It also estimated tens of thousands of homes, and hundreds of thousands of dunums of agricultural lands, destroyed.

Unlike during the first *intifada*, the Israelis were unable to come up with any political formula to end the uprising, despite efforts to deal with particular factions within the PA in order to by-pass Arafat. It was only with the death of Arafat that the stalemate was broken with all parties seeing an opportunity for significant political change. But the situation in Palestine had already changed radically, with the PLO, despite Arafat's symbolic importance, having lost standing and support, and Hamas, despite the efforts of the Israelis to crush it, having emerged as a major political factor through the vindication of the position they had taken regarding the peace process through the 1990s, as well as its leadership and role in the *intifada*.

Palestinian politics after Arafat

The death of Yasser Arafat opened up Palestinian politics. During his lifetime, his personal stature — despite his many acknowledged weaknesses — prevented other groups from challenging his formal leadership of the Palestinian movement. The Israelis hoped that Arafat's death would lead to in-fighting among the Palestinians, but other Palestinian groups decided not to field candidates against Arafat's annointed successor, Mahmud Abbas, in the PA presidential elections. For the Israelis, who had absolutely refused to deal with Arafat in the last years of his life, Abbas represents an opportunity to again try to persuade Palestinian political leaders to work with them, as well as being another Palestinian leader they hope to be able to manipulate.

This hope is likely to be thwarted, however, by the rise of Hamas as a political force. Having declined to run a candidate for the presidency, it performed particularly well in local elections early in 2005. It also achieved a dominant position in the Palestinian National Dialogue, preventing Abbas from watering down the Palestinians' political objectives to please the Israelis, and agreed to join the PLO for the first time, so it can use its increasing influence within the main Palestinian political movement. Israel has recently tried to persuade Abbas to prevent Hamas from taking part in the parliamentary elections in January 2006, but it would no longer be credible to have any Palestinian political process without Hamas involvement.

Despite all Israel's efforts to destroy it, Hamas appears likely to set the Palestinian agenda for the foreseeable future, politically as well as in terms of direct resistance to the Israeli occupation.

The withdrawal from Ghazzah and the new threat to al-Quds

When Ariel Sharon first announced his intention to withdraw unilaterally from Ghazzah, few observers believed it would really happen. In August and September this year, however, Jewish settlements were dismantled and Israeli troops withdrawn. The withdrawal was rightly celebrated as a victory for the Palestinians of Ghazzah, particularly Hamas, which dominates the political scene there. The simple fact is that the Palestinian resistance in the densely populated and severely deprived Ghazzah Strip had made it impossible for the Israelis to remain there. That is an achievement that should not be forgotten, despite the limits and context of the Israeli withdrawal.

The limits of the withdrawal are that Ghazzah remains a large, open-air prison with its borders and entry points controlled by the Israelis, who reserve the right to enter it or attack it whenever they like. The context is that Ariel Sharon is using the withdrawal from Ghazzah as a diversionary tactic to distract attention from the fact that Israel is stepping up its efforts to redefine the demographic and geopolitical realities of the West Bank, particularly around Jerusalem, again trying to establish a situation by which its control over these key areas of Palestine, including the annexation of al-Quds, and in due course the destruction of the Haram al-Sharif, is legitimised.

Since the withdrawal from Ghazzah, it has become increasingly clear that Sharon's main objective is Jerusalem. The British newspaper *The Guardian* reported on October 21 that "Sharon is confiscating thousands of dunums of Palestinian lands in Jerusalem to expand the Ar'il

and Ma'alah Adomom settlements around Jerusalem, and to build new houses for settlers, increasing settlement activities by 83 percent compared to last year.”

Since abandoning 21 settlements in Ghazzah, occupying 19 square miles of land, Sharon is known to have appropriated 23 square miles more in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Since evacuating 8,000 settlers from Ghazzah, he has sent 14,000 more into the West Bank, many of them the settlers withdrawn from Ghazzah.

The *Guardian* also quoted Sharon as having told his Likud Party conference in September that “it is of great importance for us to expand settlements in the West Bank without drawing the world’s attention. There is no need to talk much, but every need to build more settlements discreetly.”

Palestinians and other Muslims cannot afford to be unaware of the continuing threat to the city of al-Quds and to the Haram itself. The political situation may have moved on from the height of the al-Aqsa Intifada, but al-Quds remains a key front of the West’s war on Islam. Muslims cannot afford to forget this as our gazes are drawn elsewhere, to Ghazzah, Iraq, Afghanistan and other places of greater media profile at this time.



The Nur al-Din Zinki Minbar in the Masjid al-Aqsa, built by Salah al-Din Ayoubi in 583AH (1197CE), after he had liberated Al-Quds from the Crusaders, and virtually destroyed by a Zionist arson attack on the Haram al-Sharif in August 1969.

Al-Quds (Jerusalem), the third holiest city in Islam, and home to the Haram al-Sharif, the first *qiblah* of Islam and the “furthest mosque” from which the Prophet Muhammad (*saw*) was taken on his miraculous journey to the heavens, has been under Zionist control since 1967.

The Zionist control of Al-Quds and the rest of Palestine has been characterized not only by appalling violence against the Palestinian people, but by a constant campaign to undermine and destroy the Islamic holy sites. They were bombed in 1948, threatened again in 1967, and have been the subject of repeated attacks since that time. In September 2000, after the Haram was violated by Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon, Palestinians launched the Al-Aqsa Intifada to assert their determination to protect the Haram from the Zionists.

Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, argued that Palestine was an Islamic cause and not just a Palestinian one. He proclaimed the last Friday of Ramadan to be Yaum al-Quds — the Day of al-Quds — on which all Muslims should declare their commitment to the cause of liberating Palestine. Since then, Muslims all over the world have rallied on Yaum al-Quds every year to demonstrate their solidarity with the Palestinians and their commitment to liberating Palestine and Al-Quds.