

Crescent and Sword: The Hamas Enigma

Are Knudsen

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Introduction

The assassination of Sheik Ahmad Yasin, Hamas's spiritual leader, on 22 March 2004 sent shockwaves through the Palestinian community and was unanimously condemned by European political leaders. Nonetheless, less than a month later the Israelis struck again: on 17 April Sheikh Yasin's successor as Hamas leader, Abd al-Aziz Rantissi, was killed in a missile attack similar to the one that killed Sheikh Yasin. What do the twin assassinations of Yasin and Rantissi hold for the future of the organisation they founded and the popular support it enjoys in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip? In recent years, Hamas's Islamic nationalism has gradually outdone the secular nationalism of the beleaguered Palestinian Authority (PA) and rivalled the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) for the political leadership of the Palestinian people and their quest for statehood. In the latest local elections held in ten districts of Gaza in January 2005, Hamas won at least 75 out of 118 seats.¹ Why has Palestinian society, formerly known for its secular outlook, come to embrace the Islamist agenda espoused by Hamas? Is Hamas really popular with the average Palestinian or a last resort for a populace sick of being betrayed by its secular leaders? Or is Hamas's popularity based on its charitable network, catering for dispossessed Palestinians on the West Bank and the Gaza strip?

In order to answer these questions, even partially, one needs to understand the movement's historical ascent from a fringe Gaza-based group to a mainstream Islamist movement and mouthpiece for dispossessed Palestinians. Unlike the ideology and goals of other Palestinian Islamist movements which are either militant or quietist, Hamas embodies two strikingly different ideological positions that are rooted in the organisation's history and symbolised in its logo – compassionate ("Crescent") and combatant ("Sword").² This duality of "worshippers" and "warmongers" has made Hamas an enigma that has puzzled both casual observers and those opposing the organisation and its goals. However, this also accounts for the organisation's extraordinary popularity among Palestinians and the mounting political challenge to the secular nationalism of the PLO. In order to understand Hamas's current popularity, however, it is not enough to analyse the movement's ideology, politics, and history, it is also necessary to examine contemporary Palestinian society were the movement finds its political support and legitimacy.³

Origins of Palestinian Islamism

The origins of Palestinian Islamism are complex and here I will only recapitulate three important aspects of it: the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; the movement's gradual transition to ("Mandatory") Palestine; and finally, the

¹ BBC New Online. Big Hamas win in Gaza's election, January 28, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4214375.stm

² For a review of the ideology of Palestinian Islamist groups, see S. Bangstad. 2002. *Palestinian Islamist Movements: An Annotated Bibliography*. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, CMI Report R 2002-21, www.cmi.no/publications/2002/rep/r2002-21.pdf.

³ For Hamas's ideology, A. Nüsse. 1998. *Muslim Palestine: The Ideology of Hamas*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publ.; politics, K. Hroub. 2000. *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*. Washington, D.C: Institute for Palestine Studies.; and history, B. Milton-Edwards. 1996b. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*. London: I.B. Tauris.

early examples of a nascent militant Palestinian nationalism exemplified by the Qassamite movement led by the martyred Sheikh Izzedin al-Qassam (1882–1935).

The resurgence of Islam, now commonly referred to as “political Islam”, is generally attributed to the crushing military defeats of Arabic countries suffered at the hands of Israeli forces in 1967.⁴ This defeat marked the end of pan-Arabism and the start of an Islamic revival that grew to challenge nation-states in the Middle East. In order to discover the ideological roots of this revival, we must go back in time to the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt. The MB was founded in 1928 by the charismatic Hassan al-Banna (1906–49) and had within a few years become a significant religious and political force.⁵ The reason for the movement’s rapid ascent and popular appeal can be found in its appeal to Islam as a complete system that offered an alternative to the westernisation, secularisation and materialism that now threatened Muslim societies. To counter these ‘negative’ influences, al-Banna advocated a return to the roots of religion, in particular the period referred to as the Golden Age of Islam, during the reign of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (632–1258).⁶ The principal aims of al-Banna were initially not political but religious and to spread the faith the organisation formed an expanding number of religious, welfare and educational institutions and facilities. This laid the foundation of a large network that sustained the MB through difficult years of brutal suppression by successive regimes, robbing it of its leaders through the assassination of al-Banna and imprisonment of its members. After al-Banna’s death, Sayyid Qutb became the movement’s new chief ideologist. Qutb advanced a more proactive agenda that aimed to overthrow un-Islamic governments and rulers in order to resurrect the force of Islam. Qutb’s revolutionary agenda made him a threat to the Egyptian regime and he was consequently imprisoned for more than a decade until his execution in 1966. Where al-Banna had argued for a gradual change within society (an *evolutionary* approach), Qutb sought the overthrow of power in the form of a “holy war” (*jihad*) order to establish an Islamic state (a *revolutionary* approach).

Despite Nasser’s ruthless crackdown on the MB in the 1950s, it had grown to become a classless, populist movement that drew members from all walks of life, although its core membership was the urban middle class. The movement’s appeal also extended beyond Egypt and led to the formation of offshoots in countries such as Jordan, Syria and Palestine.⁷ The first MB group in Palestine was established in Jerusalem in 1946 and took part in the 1948 Arab–Israeli war. In the period 1949–67, the Palestinian branch of the MB in Gaza was forced underground after the movement was banned and later persecuted by the Nasser regime. One of the MB members in Gaza who were arrested in 1965 was one Ahmad Ismail Yasin, who later, as the titular Sheikh Yasin, would found Hamas.⁸

⁴ B. Milton-Edwards. 2000. *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Polity Press., p 123

⁵ The details of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood fall beyond the scope of this paper, but see B. Lia. 1996. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement 1928-1942*. New York: Ithaca Press.

⁶ Milton-Edwards. *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East.*, p 129

⁷ M. K. Shadid. 1988. The Muslim Brotherhood Movement in the West-Bank and Gaza. *Third World Quarterly* 10 (2):658-682.

⁸ S. Mishal, and A. Sela. 2000. *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press., p 17

At the time of Sheikh Yasin's arrest the MB in Gaza had virtually ceased to exist and the number of its adherents was negligible.⁹ On the West Bank, which was then under Jordanian control, the MB was allowed to operate freely because it was considered loyal to the Jordanian king. The annexation of the West Bank and Gaza following the Six Day War in 1967 saw the emergence of an armed resistance against Israeli occupation but the MB did not take up arms against the occupation or advocate the use of violence. Instead, the MB was slowly and deliberately building its institutional base in Gaza and spreading its message, a process aided by the gradual Islamisation that spread throughout the Middle East during the following period. Nevertheless, there was at this point no visible Islamic nationalism in Palestine, but rather the PLO's secular nationalism and a nascent Islamism that closely followed the tenets of al-Banna's original vision for Islamising society.

The MB in Palestine also gave rise to the first Palestinian Islamist party, the Liberation Party (*Hizb Tahrir*), which was founded in 1952 by a Palestinian cleric and teacher, Sheikh Taqi ad-Din an-Nabahani.¹⁰ As a breakaway faction of the MB, its radical rather than reformist agenda never had any mass appeal. Suffering from years of political repression and a subsequent crackdown by the Jordanian authorities in the early 1960s, the leadership, including an-Nabahani, was forced into exile. The surviving underground organisation never recovered from the repression and imprisonment of its members and was ultimately doomed to irrelevance beyond a small number of former MB members.

Does this mean that there was no precursor to the militant Islamist nationalism that later was to become Hamas's trademark? In fact there was: already in the 1930s, in what was then part of the British controlled "Mandatory Palestine" (1917–48), a short-lived movement had sprung up around the Syrian-born Sheikh Mohammad Izz ad-Din al-Qassam (1882–1935).¹¹ Educated at the prestigious al-Azhar University in Cairo, he became influenced by Salafism and settled in Haifa in 1921. Touring the region, he agitated against the British occupation and advocated military struggle (*jihād*) to liberate Palestine. By 1930, al-Qassam had secured a following of around 200 young men, who became known as "Qassamites". The same year al-Qassam was able to obtain a religious decree (*fatwa*) which declared that armed insurgence against the British and the Jews were permissible. The British considered al-Qassam a brigand and, prompted by the killing of a Jewish officer in November 1935, killed al-Qassam and four of his followers in their village hideout after a long gunfight. The Qassamite uprising against the British was short-lived, but nonetheless secured al-Qassam's legacy as the first Palestinian martyr. It is this historical legacy that Hamas drew on when the armed wing of Hamas was created in 1992 with the formation of the al-Qassam Brigades.

The Islamic Centre

Hamas, like all Islamist movements in the Middle East, owes its ideological roots to the Egyptian MB. The foundations of Hamas are to be found in the Islamic

⁹ Shadid. *The Muslim Brotherhood Movement in the West-Bank and Gaza.*, p 661.

¹⁰ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine.*, pp 64-71.

¹¹ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine.*, p 18.

Centre (*al-Mujamma' al-Islami*), which was established in Gaza in 1973. The founders were a group of eleven men led by Sheikh Yasin, who was then a leader of the MB in Gaza, with Abd al-Aziz Rantissi as the centre's executive director.¹² The centre was organised around a mosque, with an attached medical clinic, sports club, and women's training centre. The centre also gained control of *zakat* committees and the collection of an obligatory alms tax (*zakat*) provided an important source of revenue that was used to aid needy families as well as to run and expand the organisation's medical-, religious- and health facilities. The centre managed to gain control of Gaza mosques, whose numbers had tripled between 1967 and 1987 from 200 to 600.¹³ The centre later established branches in other parts of the Gaza Strip and by 1985 had a membership of close to 2,000 persons. Most of them were employed in some sections of the extensive *waqf* network that the centre controlled in Gaza.¹⁴ In 1978 the Islamic Centre was encouraged by the Israeli authorities to register as a charity and was subsequently granted a legal licence.¹⁵ This was not a tactical blunder by the Israelis, but a strategic move to support any organisation that could undermine the secular nationalists and over time mount a political challenge to the PLO. For the same reason, Israel continued to cultivate its ties with the Islamic Centre, including after Hamas was formally established in 1987, and tacitly approved the money flowing into Hamas's coffers.

The supreme leadership of the Islamic Centre consisted of five men who shared similar experiences.¹⁶ They were all born shortly before the 1948 war and settled as refugees in the Gaza Strip, where they were excluded from taking political office because of their status as refugees. All of them completed a professional education in Egypt as doctors, engineers or, like Sheikh Yasin, teachers. Only Sheikh Yasin, the eldest of the group, belonged to the old MB generation, but neither he nor the others had any formal religious training.¹⁷ Sheikh Yasin's title was honorific rather than theological and he remained essentially a teacher who, true to his MB roots, focused on preaching (*da'wa*) and teaching (*tarbiya*) in the Gaza strip.¹⁸ The large following that he gained there was a result of the ideas he espoused, his frugal lifestyle and his charismatic personality. Taken together, they earned Shekikh Yasin enormous respect and made him a moral authority and

¹² Z. Abu-Amr. 1994. *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press., p 16.

¹³ Figures cited in, Abu-Amr. *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*., p 15; According to a more conservative estimate, the number of mosques in the Gaza Strip doubled from 77 in 1967 to 150 in 1986 Mishal, and Sela. *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*., p 21 In the early 1990s an estimated 40 per cent of the mosques were controlled by Hamas, Abu-Amr. *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*., p 16.

¹⁴ Religious endowment (*waqf*) is an institution that controls landed property, shops, houses and residential areas which are leased to local inhabitants. In the Gaza strip, about 10 per cent of all real estate is controlled by the *waqf* institution, Abu-Amr. *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*., p 15.

¹⁵ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*., p 101.

¹⁶ Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, Ibrahim Yazouri, Mahmoud Zahar, Khalil Koka and Abd al-Aziz Rantissi, see Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*., p 126.

¹⁷ For a more detailed biography of Sheikh Yasin, see Z. Abu-Amr. 1997. Shaykh Ahmad Yasin and the origins of Hamas. In *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East*, edited by R. S. Appleby. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

¹⁸ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*., p 101.

arbiter of financial disputes, which enabled the centre to assume a legal role in Gaza society.

The first *intifada* and the emergence of Hamas

On 8 December 1987 a motor accident between an Israeli truck and vehicles transporting Palestinian workers triggered spontaneous riots that grew to become a widespread uprising (*intifada*). During the first months of the uprising, Islamic Jihad was active in organising the resistance. To pre-empt attacks by Islamic Jihad, the Israeli authorities deported Islamic Jihad leaders, including the founders Fathi Shqaqi and Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Auda, in January 1988. Not long afterwards, the secular nationalists formed a coalition known as the United National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU), which comprised Fateh and the secular left-wing and communist parties. The Islamic resistance was slower to react to the *intifada* and only in January 1988 did Hamas officially emerge on the scene. The reason for this delay is debated, but was primarily an ideological one. The Islamic Centre, an outgrowth of the MB, was not prepared to declare a jihad; in fact, up until the date of the uprising, Yasin had argued that the time for jihad had yet to come.¹⁹ The leaders, in particular Sheikh Yasin, were therefore anxious about committing the centre to declaring a jihad, in contravention of its former policies. As a way out of the impasse, it was agreed that they would create a separate organisation, Hamas (*Harakat al-Muqwama al-Islamiyya*), that would partake in the uprising. Should the uprising falter, the Islamic Centre could escape retribution from Israel, but in the event that it succeeded, it could claim the organisation as its own.

In mid-August 1988, the Hamas charter was issued and Hamas recognised as a branch of the Palestinian MB (Article 2).²⁰ Nonetheless, the charter makes only a passing reference to the importance of Islamising society and places more emphasis on Palestine and jihad. Palestine is considered an Islamic trust or endowment (*waqf*), so that no one has the right to give up any part of it (Article 11). To liberate Palestine, the only solution is recourse to a jihad, now a religious duty of every Muslim (Article 15). All other peace initiatives and negotiations are a “waste of time” (Article 13). The PLO is recognised as a key “ally, father, brother, relative, friend” (Article 27), but criticised for its secularism, recognition of Israel and acceptance of a two-state solution.

Hamas’s organisation lacks the PLO’s complex bureaucracy. The overall leadership is organised as an advisory council (*Majlis shura*) headed by Sheikh Yasin as the senior leader and spiritual figurehead.²¹ Originally, Hamas was administratively divided into three different wings: the political wing, the intelligence branch and, from 1992, a military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades. After some time, the latter two amalgamated into one. While the leadership of the

¹⁹ Abu-Amr. *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*, p 11

²⁰ Hamas. 1988. The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement. August 18, 1988, www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm.

²¹ Z. Abu-Amr. 1993. Hamas: A historical and political background. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22 (4):5-19., p 13

political wing is known, the leadership of the military wing remains a secret.²² From 1989, the Hamas leadership expanded and was no longer recruited from within the closed circle of Gaza-based veterans, but represented a growing number of young educated technocrats who, generally speaking, were more radical and uncompromising than the old guard. From 1992, many of them were attached to a new political body, the Political Bureau (*al-Maktab al-syasi*), with members from Hamas representatives from the Arab states and Iran. From its base in Amman, the “external” leadership controlled its finances and the military wing.²³ Beginning in 1998, more of the leadership authority was moved to the external leadership, which in general has been more willing to authorise the use of violence.²⁴

As already mentioned the Hamas leadership had no formal religious training and partly for this reason had not produced a distinct body of scholarship, apart from the Hamas charter. The secular outlook of Palestinian society has also meant that a specific Palestinian jurisprudence (*ijtihad*) was lacking and made Hamas dependent on foreign ideologues and scholars. Accordingly, Hamas’s political message can be described as “populist” and was disseminated through pamphlets, leaflets and magazines that aimed to bring Hamas’s message to the general public. The novelty of Hamas’s ideology is the amalgamation of nationalism (*wataniyya*) and Islam which has become the organisation’s trademark.²⁵ Hamas combines the MB’s reformist approach which emphasises that only by embracing Islam will the Palestinians emerge victorious, with Qutb’s revolutionary call for jihad as an individual duty of every Muslim. Recovering custodianship of Palestine is made a sacred obligation by terming Palestine an Islamic endowment (*waqf*) whose custodianship must be entrusted to Muslims, who are under a religious duty to protect it. The transitional objective of Hamas is ending the occupation. The long-term strategic objective is the creation of an Islamic state on the ruins of political Zionism. One reason for Hamas’s popular support is the ideology’s down-to-earth simplicity and specificity to the Palestinian context: merging nationalism and Islamism and making them mirror images of each other. This is also discernable in Hamas’s organisational vision which portrays it as an ingrained part of the Palestinian people’s hopes, goals and aspirations, making the “people” and the “organisation” inseparable. This involves an “invention of tradition” on Hamas’s part, and is also evident in the organisation’s use of religious symbols for political ends.²⁶ The fervent Palestinian nationalism that emerged after the 1967

²² There have been questions as to whether Hamas does have a “military wing”, or whether this is just a ploy to discourage attacks. Many, especially Israeli-based, intelligence sources believe that Hamas and the al-Qassam Brigade share a joint leadership and are thus legitimate targets, ICG. 2004. *Dealing With Hamas*. Amman, Brussels: International Crisis Group, Middle East Report N°21, www.icg.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/21_dealing_with_hamas.pdf. p 11

²³ Mishal, and Sela. *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*. pp 88, 161

²⁴ V. Langohr. 2001. Of Islamists and ballot boxes: Rethinking the relationship between Islamisms and electoral politics. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (4):591-610., p 595

²⁵ Hamas’s merger of Islamism with nationalism goes against the revolutionary ideology of Sayyid Qutb that Hamas is heir to. Qutb viewed nationalism as a delusion that stood in the way of realising a righteous Muslim community which respected God’s laws (*dar al-Islam*) and therefore could be realised anywhere, without reference to land and territory, see Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*., p 182. For similar reasons, Hassan al-Banna objected to the formation of political parties, see Nüsse. *Muslim Palestine: The Ideology of Hamas*., p 23

²⁶ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*.

occupation of the West Bank and Gaza can be seen as a revival of al-Qassam's call to take up arms against the British occupation. Ideologically, Palestinian Islamism can be interpreted as a response to the Zionist claim to a Jewish homeland, which became a millenarian goal for generations of Jews in the diaspora yearning for "next year in Jerusalem".

The formation of Hamas as a separate organisation meant a shift in Sheikh Yasin's and the Islamic Centre's views of armed resistance against the Israeli occupation in the form of a jihad. The use of jihad was not in itself a novelty; this had already been a major impetus in the strategy of the Islamist precursor to Hamas, namely Islamic Jihad. Islamic Jihad was formed in the early 1980s by two Gaza-based Palestinians, Fathi Shiqaqi and Sheikh Abd-al Aziz Auda. During the 1980s, tensions grew between the Islamic Centre and Islamic Jihad over the Iranian revolution, which the former denounced. In 1986 Islamic Jihad began its military activity by killing two Israeli taxi drivers. Similar attacks followed in 1987 and although some of the Islamic Jihad attackers were arrested and sentenced, the Israelis were unable to uproot the organisation, despite using curfews and house demolitions. However, it was Hamas that popularised the notion of jihad by giving it a different meaning than that employed by Islamic Jihad.²⁷ The Hamas charter underlines the importance of jihad, but, importantly, delimits the concept by applying it to ending the Israeli occupation of Palestine. According to the charter, there is no solution to the Palestine problem except through a jihad, and Article 15 reads: "When an enemy occupies some of the Muslim lands, jihad becomes obligatory on every Muslim".²⁸ Hamas therefore applied jihad differently from the competing Palestinian Islamist movement, the Islamic Jihad. Although the goals of the two organisations overlap, Islamic Jihad tends towards a more universal application of jihad, including restoration of the Caliphate in all Muslim countries. Hamas, on the other hand, shied away from an encompassing definition of jihad, restricting the term to opposition against Israel.²⁹ Nonetheless, detailed studies of Hamas and its militant wing show that violence is used pragmatically, more often than not in the form of calculated tit-for-tat retaliation against the Israeli army or, since the Hebron massacre in 1994, Israeli civilians.³⁰ The first attack on military targets in mid-1989 ended the honeymoon between Hamas and the Israeli authorities. The abduction and killing of two Israeli soldiers led to the arrest of more than 300 hundred Hamas activists, including Sheikh Yasin. In addition, the organisation was outlawed and membership made a criminal offence. Sentenced to 40 years in jail, Sheikh Yasin was released in a prisoner swap before the end of his prison term in 1997.³¹ Yasin's triumphant return to Gaza the same year increased Hamas's stature vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority (PA).

²⁷ B. Milton-Edwards. 1992. The concept of *jihad* and the Palestinian Islamic movement: A comparison of ideas and techniques. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19 (1):48-53.

²⁸ Hamas. The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement.

²⁹ Despite the ideological differences between Islamic Jihad and Hamas, their joint commitment to armed resistance has prompted attempts to unite the two, see Hroub. *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*, p 128

³⁰ HRW. 2002. *Erased in a Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks against Israeli Civilians*. New York: Human Rights Watch, www.hrw.org/reports/2002/isrl-pa/ISRAELPA1002.pdf, p 66

³¹ Sheikh Yasin was released from prison in a deal brokered by King Hussein of Jordan following an ill-fated assassination attempt on Khaled Mish'al (then Head of the Hamas Politburo in Amman) by two Mossad agents.

Elections and popular support

The absence of national elections in the Occupied Territories makes it difficult to measure the full extent of Hamas's popular support. However, one source of information is the results from elections to university councils and professional syndicates. It is worth noting, however, that in the electoral system used in the Occupied Territories, the percentage of popular votes does not translate into an equivalent ratio of seats in elected councils.³² In 1992, the Hamas bloc won 45 per cent of the votes in the Nablus Chamber of Commerce elections, but due to the election rules, only secured three out of twelve seats. The same year, the Hamas bloc also won 40 per cent of the votes in the student council elections in al-Najah University (Nablus), but did not obtain a single council seat. In the period 1991–92, Hamas took part in 23 elections in the West Bank and Gaza. Of the total 96,256 votes cast in these elections, the Islamic block (supporting Hamas) won 45.8 per cent of votes and the National block (supporting PLO) won 50.9 per cent.³³ In the post-Oslo Accords elections after 1993, Hamas continued its strong electoral showing, beating Fateh in the al-Najah student elections in 1996 (46.7 per cent) and again in 1997 (49.5 per cent of the votes). Even at the Bir Zeit University elections, one of Fateh's most important strongholds, Hamas secured 44.7 per cent of votes compared to Fateh's 33.6 per cent. In the professional syndicates, Hamas lost to Fateh in the elections to the Medical Union but won the Engineering Union elections. Unsurprisingly, Hamas trumped Fateh in the elections to the Islamic University in Gaza by winning 75.5 per cent of the votes to Fateh's 15.6 per cent.

Likewise, Hamas's covert participation in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 1996 was a calculated decision aimed at avoiding conferring credibility on the Oslo Accords (and the Declaration of Principles, DOP) while at the same time securing a future role in the subsequent municipal elections. Initially, the organisation considered four possible options: participation, boycott, boycott as well as undermining and disrupting elections, and participation under a name other than Hamas.³⁴ Over time, the Hamas leadership softened its initial decision to boycott the elections to one of "refraining from participation". At the same time, the organisation tacitly encouraged its members to run as independents and for the rank-and-file to vote for these candidates as well as Fateh candidates known for their good relations with the Islamic opposition. Exit polls found that an estimated 60 to 70 per cent of Hamas supporters participated in the elections. By unofficially participating in the council elections, Hamas was able to exercise its influence without compromising its principled stand against the DOP, its opposition to the PA leadership and the prospects of Israeli domination of the elections. This strategy was also borne out by the fact that only those registering their vote in the PA elections were allowed to vote in the subsequent municipal elections, which Hamas not only contested but expected to win.³⁵

None of the electoral results cited above can be assumed to reflect the popular support of Hamas among the Palestinian population as such. Hamas itself claims

³² Abu-Amr. *Hamas: A historical and political background.*, p 15

³³ Hroub. *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice.*, p 217

³⁴ Mishal, and Sela. *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence.*, p 124

³⁵ Langohr. *Of Islamists and ballot boxes: Rethinking the relationship between Islamisms and electoral politics.*, p 596

that it attracts from 40 to 50 per cent of the electorate. Although this is an exaggeration, it does show that within a few years of its formation Hamas had made inroads into the constituencies of the established secular organisations and penetrated deeply into their political bastions. Hamas's grassroots strategy had proved very effective and is even more remarkable coming at a time of a string of political victories for secular nationalism such as the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the creation of the PA in 1994. The Islamist block that Hamas is part of continued its inroads into the popular support for the secular nationalism espoused by the PLO and Fateh, the largest political faction. On a more general level, the late Sheikh Yasin on many occasions reiterated that Hamas would respect the will of the people as expressed in free-and-fair elections. That Hamas under certain conditions could contest national elections as a regular political party has also not been ruled out. In March 1996, the National Islamic Salvation Party (*Hizb al-Khalas al-watani al-Islami*, a.k.a., Khalas) was formed in Gaza. Despite denying any connection with Hamas, the leadership and members belong to Hamas.³⁶

The Oslo Accords and the Madrid Process

During the first years of Hamas's existence there was increasing friction with the PLO, which tried to include the organisation in its own nationalist fold.³⁷ Hamas consistently rejected the PLO's and Fateh's overtures, seeking instead to establish itself as a political alternative. The tensions between them grew following the "Madrid Process", a series of bilateral and multilateral discussions that were held in Madrid between October 1991 and August 1993 between Israel, Palestinian and Jordanian delegates and Syria. The Madrid Process brought Israel and the PLO (Fateh) together, but excluded the Islamists as well as the secular left-wing opposition parties. The Madrid Process was mired with problems and was followed by the secret back-door negotiations that led to the signing of the Oslo Accords.³⁸ Hamas was a vocal opponent of the Madrid process and the Oslo Accords, in line with the organisation's rejection of negotiated settlements that fell short of a full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.³⁹ The discontent over the Madrid process and the Oslo Accords fractured the Palestinian resistance and, in 1994, led to the formation of the Palestinian Forces Alliance (PFA), which comprised Hamas and nine other Damascus-based rejectionist groups, hence their being named the Damascus Ten. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that Hamas's leadership under Sheikh Yasin always sought to discourage infighting between Palestinian political factions. This would only serve the interests of Israel and weaken the Palestinian quest for statehood. This pragmatism on Hamas's part can be explained by the importance of preserving some semblance of internal unity among the Palestinian factions, the PA and the populace.

³⁶ Hroub. *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice.*, p 259

³⁷ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine.*, p 197

³⁸ H. H. Waage. 2002. Explaining the Oslo backchannel: Norway's political past in the Middle East. *Middle East Journal* 56 (4):597-615.

³⁹ The Oslo Accords and the Declaration of Principles (DOP) postponed issues such as the final status of Jerusalem, the refugees' right of return, and the pull-out of Jewish settlements, leaving them to be settled in the so-called "final status" talks, see R. Brynen. 1997. Imagining a solution: Final status arrangements and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26 (2):42-58.

While the Palestinian political factions avoided infighting, armed resistance vis-à-vis Israel was stepped up during the peace process and the signing of the Oslo Agreement. In the early 1990s, Islamic Jihad re-emerged as the main opponent of the Oslo Accords with new attacks on Israeli soldiers and civilians, which ultimately led to the assassination of the Gaza-based leader of the Shqaqi-Auda faction in November 1994 and Fathi Shqaqi a year later in November 1995 in Malta.⁴⁰ The killings were revenged a few days later when a suicide bomber killed three army soldiers at the Netzarim checkpoint in Gaza. In February 1994, 29 worshippers were killed at the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron by the right-wing Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein. The Hebron Massacre proved a turning point for Hamas and prompted the first use of suicide attacks targeting civilians. In April 1994, two separate suicide attacks killed thirteen Israelis, all of them unarmed civilians. Despite a severe Israeli crackdown and mass arrests of more than 1,600 people, the Israelis were unable to prevent a string of suicide attacks by the al-Qassam Brigades, which by the end of the year had killed 33 Israelis, most of them civilians. The attacks proved that Israel could neither contain the political violence nor protect its citizens.

Hamas's welfare network

All the Islamist movements in the Middle East of any importance receive either foreign backing or foreign funding or both. Hamas is no exception and estimates of the organisation's total budget ranges from US\$ 40 to 70 million.⁴¹ Hamas has since its inception in 1987–88 received large sums of money from its benefactors in the Gulf countries and this accounts for about 85 per cent of the budget. A smaller amount, about 15 per cent, is collected locally through religious endowments (*waqf*) and alms (*zakat*). Until the Six Day War in 1967, the *waqf* on the West Bank was under Jordanian control (Jordan annexed the West Bank in 1950). This continued after the Israeli occupation and subsequent annexation of the West Bank and Gaza. Following the outbreak of the first *intifada*, it became impossible for the Jordanian *waqf* authorities to maintain control over the holy shrines, the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of Rock, which had become veritable battlefields. When the PA was formally established in 1994 in the Gaza Strip and Jericho, Palestinian control of the *waqf* became an important goal for the PLO, due to the immense symbolic importance of the holy shrines, in addition to bolstering future claims to Jerusalem as a capital in a liberated Palestine.⁴² In 1995, the PLO appointed its own *waqf* custodian, and a year later established a separate *waqf* department under the PA.⁴³ In Gaza especially, this was used to take over Hamas-controlled mosques and institutions, initially depriving Hamas of much of its social infrastructure.

Nonetheless, controlling the *waqf* and *zakat* institutions made Hamas a key provider of social welfare in the occupied territories. Protecting this welfare network was so important that the organisation tailored its violent tactics to prevent a backlash from the Israeli forces and the PA aimed at destroying or

⁴⁰ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*., p 170

⁴¹ ICG. 2003. *Islamic Welfare Activism in the Occupied Territories: A Legitimate target?* Amman and Brussels: International Crisis Group, Report no. 13, www.crisisweb.org/library/documents/report_archive/A400933_02042003.pdf., p 13

⁴² Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*., p 178

⁴³ Hroub. *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*., p 240

disrupting the welfare system.⁴⁴ In 1996 the PA, under external pressure from Israeli and the US to act against the Islamist movements, took over all the Hamas-controlled mosques and placed them under the Department of Endowments. A year later the PA closed more than 20 charitable institutions belonging to Hamas.⁴⁵ Despite the disastrous impact on Hamas's social infrastructure, the organisation did not respond by violent means but issued verbal protests and denunciations. This muffled response was probably due to the fact that the PA secretly left Hamas in de facto control of the social welfare infrastructure.⁴⁶ On a more general level, Hamas has always taken pains to separate its formal dialogue with Fateh, which Hamas considers a legitimate organisation, and the PA itself, which is seen as an outgrowth of the Oslo Accords and therefore as lacking in popular legitimacy.⁴⁷

Palestinian society

It is widely believed that it is neither Hamas's political programme nor its ideology, but rather the living conditions in the occupied territories that has made the West Bank, and especially Gaza Strip one of the most densely populated areas in the world, the centre of its political support. The high relative deprivation experienced by generations of Palestinians is a major reason for the gradual rise of Islamism in the occupied territories, rather than an Islamic resurgence fuelled by the failure of modernisation.⁴⁸ To get a better picture of contemporary Palestinian society, it is necessary to give a brief summary of the current demographic characteristics of the West Bank and Gaza.

The combined population of the Occupied Territories is presently around 3.8 million, with an annual growth rate of about 3.5 per cent due to a high fertility and low mortality rate. Even anticipating a lower fertility rate, the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza is expected to reach 4.4 million by 2010.⁴⁹ In June 2004 the West Bank had a population of about 2.41 million, about a fourth of them (654,971) refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) a significant section of these camp-based (c. 160,000). In the Gaza Strip, the total population is 1.41 million, more than half of them UNRWA refugees (824,662) and about half of these camp-based (452,186). A smaller number of refugees (258,750) reside in Israel, mostly in East Jerusalem.⁵⁰ The refugees registered with UNRWA include those internally displaced in the 1948 and 1967 wars and their descendants. They are provided with a meagre package of services and welfare benefits (schooling, medical care etc.), which are insufficient in relation to their present needs.

⁴⁴ Mishal, and Sela. *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*.

⁴⁵ Hroub. *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*., p 240-41

⁴⁶ ICG. *Islamic Welfare Activism in the Occupied Territories: A Legitimate target?*, p 6

⁴⁷ B. Milton-Edwards. 1996a. Political Islam in Palestine in an environment of peace? *Third World Quarterly* 17 (7):199-225., p 213

⁴⁸ Milton-Edwards. *Islamic Politics in Palestine*., p 6ff

⁴⁹ J. Pedersen, S. Randall, and M. Khawaja, eds. 2001. *Growing Fast: The Palestinian Population in the West Bank and Gaza*. Oslo: FAFO Report No. 353, www.faf.no/pub/rapp/353/353.pdf., p 19

⁵⁰ The population and refugee figures have been compiled from the latest statistics published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (www.pcbs.org) and the United Nations Relief Works Organisation (www.unrwa.org). Note that figures only refer to registered refugees and excludes those not granted UNRWA refugee status.

Nonetheless, there is almost universal school attendance and high literacy rates among the young generations (below 35 years), especially for the UNRWA refugees, whose refugee status entitles them to free primary education.⁵¹

Demographically this is a young population – nearly half (47 per cent) of the population is under 15 years old. This translates into a very high “dependency ratio” (producers vs. consumers) and dependency burden for the breadwinners. In 1997, an estimated 22,615 families comprising about 278,348 individuals received assistance from Islamic institutions in 1997.⁵² By 2001, the number had risen to 145,450 households, indirectly supporting at least half a million people. At present, about one in every six Palestinians in the Occupied Territories benefits from support from Islamic charities. The Islamic welfare organisations are of two kinds: those concerned with the collection and distribution of alms (*zakat* committees), and those concerned with service delivery (education, medical relief, etc. There is no evidence that Hamas or the other Islamic charities provide assistance conditional upon political or religious support, rather than according to socioeconomic criteria. Charity aid and *zakat* donations are preferentially distributed to widows, female-headed households or families of slain martyrs, as well as to orphaned children. Detailed studies bear out the efficiency and professionalism in the service delivery of Islamic charities.

Hamas allocates almost all of its revenues (95 per cent) to its social services. The organisation’s commitment to social service delivery is no coincidence: it is inscribed in the Hamas Charter (Article 20, 21), stressing the importance of social solidarity: “Part of social welfare consists of helping all who are in need of material, spiritual, or collective co-operation. It is incumbent on members of the Islamic Resistance Movement to look after the needs of the people as they would their own needs”. Hamas is adamant that it neither receives monetary support from Islamic charities nor diverts some of its own funds to Islamic charities. This is a matter of principle – a strict compartmentalising of its military and social activities – as well as guarding against reprisals against Islamic charities purportedly co-funding Hamas. Hamas claims to provide direct assistance to Palestinians, hence it does not need any intermediaries.⁵³ Additionally, Hamas claims that all but a few mosques are under the administration of the PA Ministry of Social Affairs, which appoints the clerics and pays their salaries. All this leaves open the question of whether Hamas’s political support is premised on its social welfare institutions being used to recruit new followers, adherents and sympathisers.

The second *intifada*

During the first *intifada* (1987–93) more than 2,200 Palestinians were killed. The second *intifada*, the so-called al-Aqsa *intifada*, erupted in September 2000, following a visit to the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of Rock by the then Likud party leader Ariel Sharon, shielded by more than 1,000 policemen. The demonstration left seven Palestinians dead and more than 250 wounded. By the

⁵¹ Pedersen, Randall, and Khawaja, eds. *Growing Fast: The Palestinian Population in the West Bank and Gaza.*, p 36

⁵² ICG. *Islamic Welfare Activism in the Occupied Territories: A Legitimate target?*, p 7

⁵³ ICG. *Islamic Welfare Activism in the Occupied Territories: A Legitimate target?*, p 12

end of 2002, approximately 2,100 Palestinians had been killed. The outbreak of the second (al-Aqsa) *intifada* in September 2000 badly hurt the Palestinian domestic economy, causing a massive loss of jobs, especially among the almost 150,000 Palestinians working in Israel and those in other parts of the private sector.⁵⁴ Additionally, an estimated 100,000 persons, predominantly young professionals, have left the occupied territories for Jordan or the West. At present, a large number of poverty-stricken Palestinian families – two-thirds of the Palestinians are now below the “poverty line” – survive on a mix of informal assistance (remittances, local credit facilities and religious charity *zakat*) and formal help (food aid, cash assistance, donations), administered by UNRWA (refugees), Palestinian NGOs and the PA’s Ministry of Social Affairs.⁵⁵ Typically, the impoverished families endure cramped housing in large conjugal families with many dependants and few breadwinners and are, if not unemployed, than at least underemployed. It is likely that it is in this disenfranchised segment of the population that Hamas and the other Islamist movements find their core support.⁵⁶

In the public and civil sector, however, the PA employs about 120,000 persons, and is thus the major employer in the West Bank and Gaza. Assuming that each employee is the sole breadwinner for an average sized family (6.37 persons), more than 750,000 persons depend on the PA for their livelihoods.⁵⁷ Even if this figure is exaggerated and the PA has been forced to slash spending, being the major employer makes the PA a bastion of political patronage, which is used to bolster support for Fateh and PLO. Nonetheless, by 2002 the PA controlled only 18 per cent of the occupied territories (mainly cities) and shared control of an additional 22 per cent (mainly villages); the rest was controlled by Israel. Between 28 March and 4 April 2002, the Israelis invaded the West Bank and crushed Arafat’s compound, in addition to destroying and looting all the national Palestinian institutions built since the signing of the Oslo Agreement.⁵⁸

During the past few years, the maximalist policies of Hamas, as well as the minimalist two-state solution of the PLO, which includes a return to the 1967 borders (the “green line”, that is the 1949 armistice line), have been shattered by the construction of the so-called Separation Barrier, more often referred to as the “Separation Wall” or even the “Apartheid Wall”. There is now a fear that the wall will not only encircle the West Bank, but also further fragment Palestinian areas in a cantonment process that will isolate Palestinian towns and townships. The expected Israeli pull-out from Gaza has already been delayed, but is not expected to have any bearing on the conflict as a whole.

⁵⁴ P. Sletten, and J. Pedersen. 2003. *Coping with Conflict: Palestinian Communities Two Years into the Intifada*, FAFO Report, No. 408. Oslo: FAFO Report, No. 408, www.faf.no/pub/rapp/408/408.pdf, p 23

⁵⁵ In 2003, an estimated three-quarter of the Palestinians lived below the UN poverty line of US\$ 2 per day, see ICG. *Islamic Welfare Activism in the Occupied Territories: A Legitimate target?*, p 14

⁵⁶ A similar drift towards Islamism is also evident among sections of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon, see A. Knudsen. forthcoming. Islamism in the *diaspora*: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2005.

⁵⁷ Sletten, and Pedersen. *Coping with Conflict: Palestinian Communities Two Years into the Intifada.*, p 57

⁵⁸ G. Usher. 2003. Facing defeat: The intifada two years on. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32 (2):21-40.

Conclusion

Hamas was created by Palestinian refugees born around 1948 and educated in Egypt, where they were exposed to the ideas of the Egyptian MB. Returning to the Gaza Strip, they put these ideas into practice and from 1973 built a large following from their base in the Islamic Centre. The first Palestinian *intifada* in 1987 led to the creation of Hamas, an Islamist movement espousing a nationalist agenda whose militant Islamism perhaps masked its commitment to social welfare activism. The goals of the Islamic Centre and later Hamas were gradually to win over the populace, especially in the Gaza Strip, now the centre of Palestinian Islamism. Hamas remained, however, an indigenous organisation committed to liberating Mandatory Palestine.

Hamas is a highly disciplined organisation – cease-fire agreements are not violated and threats of revenge always honoured – and have on numerous occasions proved to be adept at pragmatic *realpolitik*. Nonetheless, Hamas is generally considered a Muslim extremist organisation because of its advocacy of armed resistance. This is not, though, a view that most Palestinians would subscribe to. Had Hamas promoted extremist ideas and actions, its popular support would have waned. Popular support is the lifeblood of all social and political movements, of which Hamas is but one example. As such, Hamas's political fortunes have been closely associated with the Palestinian uprisings (*intifada*), which have led to an outpouring of support for the movement and galvanised opposition to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. While Fateh and the PLO have attempted to broker a peace deal with Israel (such as the Oslo Accords and the DOP), Hamas has sought to break any such deal, but not with all means available, in an effort to prevent Palestinian infighting. While the corruption within the PA has tarnished its image, as well as that of PLO and the late Yassir Arafat, no such charge has been levelled against Hamas, whose standing among fellow Palestinians is very high.

Islamic Jihad was the first Palestinian resistance movement to merge militancy and nationalism, but it never grew to become a populist movement. By comparison, Hamas created a much more sophisticated organisation, thanks in part to Israeli patronage of its predecessor, the Islamic Centre, from 1978–87 and during the initial phase of establishing Hamas (1987–89). The emergence of Hamas in 1987 was an example not only of the reformist “Islamism from below” (Hassan al-Banna) and of the revolutionary “Islamism from above” (Sayyed Qutb), but also of “post-facto Islamism”, where an existing territorial and ethnic conflict was Islamised.⁵⁹

The failure of secular nationalism is clearly evident from the siege and subsequent destruction of the PA headquarters in Ramallah and the humiliating house arrest imposed on the late Yassir Arafat. These events show the limits of negotiated settlements and have, at least temporarily, crushed the hopes for Palestinian statehood.⁶⁰ Hamas has also been weakened and suffered intense humiliation by

⁵⁹ K. S. Vikør. 1998. Politisk islam: fundament eller utvekst? (Political Islam: Foundation or outgrowth?). In *Til debatt: Innlegg ved norske historiedagar 1996*, edited by Ø. Bjørnson, E. Nysæther and A. K. Uthaug. Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen, Historisk Institutt skrifter 3., p 89

⁶⁰ B. Milton-Edwards, and A. Crooke. 2004. Elusive ingredient: Hamas and the peace process. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33 (4):39-52.

having two of its leaders (and founders) killed within weeks of each other. The deadly accuracy of the attacks supports claims that the attackers have been aided by Palestinian informers about the exact whereabouts of the victims. The twin assassinations of Yasin and Rantissi in March and April 2004 were only the latest of more than 300 assassinations of Hamas leaders and cadre since mid-2001 and marked the start of a more ruthless crackdown on the movement's leaders in Gaza and abroad.⁶¹ The funeral processions following the death of Yasin and Rantissi attest to the popular outburst of grief and moral outrage among the embittered Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. However, Hamas's sweeping electoral victories in the latest local elections in Gaza is a testimony that the organisation is not a spent force but a potent political actor the new PLO-leadership and the Israeli authorities ignore at their peril.

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⁶¹ Hamas's casualty figures cited in, K. Hroub. 2004. Hamas after Sheikh Yasin and Rantisi. *Ibid.* 33 (4):21-38., p 28; In September a member of Hamas's military wing, Izz El-Deen Sheikh Khalil, was killed by a car bomb in Damascus, see BBC News. Online. Syria blast kills Hamas militant. September 26, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3691082.stm In October an air strike killed Adnan al-Ghoul, one of the leading Hamas figures in the Gaza Strip, see BBC News. Online. Israel raid kills Gaza Hamas man. October 22, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3764734.stm.

Summary

This paper analyses the popular support to Hamas, the most important of the Palestinian Islamist movements today. The paper charts the movement's historical ascendancy from a fringe Gaza-based group to a mainstream Islamist movement and mouthpiece for dispossessed Palestinians. Since 2001, Hamas's leadership has come under increasing attack from Israel, killing a number of the movement's leaders and senior members, most prominently Sheikh Yasin, the movement's founder and spiritual leader, and his successor as Hamas leader, Abd al-Aziz Rantissi. Nonetheless, Hamas's duality as "worshippers" and "warmongers" has made the organisation extraordinarily popular among dispossessed Palestinians and a mounting political challenge to the secular nationalism of the PLO. At present, two-thirds of the Palestinians live below the "poverty line" and it is likely that it is in this disenfranchised segment of the population that Hamas finds its core support. Presently, about one in every six Palestinians in the Occupied Territories benefits from support from Islamic charities. Hamas, on its part, allocates almost all of its revenues to its social services, but there is no evidence that Hamas or the other Islamic charities provide assistance conditional upon political support.

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