

# THE DIVIDED RESISTANCE MOVEMENT: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF HAMAS' INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND FOREIGN SUPPORT

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**G**hazi Hamad, a Hamas spokesman, did not mince words in blasting his organization's recent performance in government. In an August 2006 editorial in the Palestinian daily *al-Ayyam*, he warned, "We have lost the connection between the resistance and other aspects of life. There is an abyss between the resistance, politics, and the people" (MEMRI). In fact, his words serve as both diagnosis and symptom of the tensions brewing within his organization. Since its founding, Hamas has balanced its pursuit of domestic power with the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state over all of modern-day Israel. Through uprisings and peace processes, this compromise has manifested itself in one overarching strategy: to strengthen Hamas' role in Palestinian society while raising the costs—political and human—borne by the Israeli occupation. However, beneath the banner of Islam and within this shared strategic understanding lie questions of priorities: well-being or resistance? Peace or justice? Autonomy or strength? In its new role in leading the Palestinian Authority (PA), these questions involve tradeoffs and sacrifices that Hamas can no longer ignore. In publishing his editorial, Ghazi Hamad, one of the organization's loudest voices within the PA and a resident of the Gaza Strip, exposed important disagreement within Hamas over how best to balance ideology with the reality on the ground.

Though it is generally considered a cohesive and disciplined movement, particularly in comparison with its rival Fatah tension within Hamas' leadership has long played a role in the organization's decision-making process. Since the end of the first intifada, Hamas has grown increasingly divided between pragmatic leaders within the Palestinian territories and a more powerful, hard-line

leadership living in exile. The responsibilities that accompany the organization's leading role in government and the international community's embargo on aid to the Hamas-led PA have driven a wedge into this rift. The external leadership's grip on power and increasingly close relationship with Iran make it extremely unlikely that Hamas will adopt a more moderate position in the face of international pressure. But whatever the moral and theoretical merits of withholding funding from the Hamas government, the United States must recognize that continuing the Western economic blockade will strengthen Tehran's influence within the organization.

## FOUNDING AND CHARTER

As stated explicitly in its charter, Hamas is an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Palestine. Though the MB calls for the establishment of Islamic governance across the Middle East, Israeli leadership did not initially view the organization as a threat. After annexing the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 War, Israel provided the Islamic group with more room to operate than Israel provided for Jordan or Egypt. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a leading figure within the MB in Gaza and the future spiritual leader of Hamas, exploited this new opening. Operating primarily within Gaza's overpopulated and impoverished refugee camps, Yassin helped focus the organization on "institutionally based efforts to imbue the society with *da'wa*, that is, religious preaching and education" (Mishal and Sela 16). Gaza's refugees proved a receptive audience, and, as the movement grew, Yassin and his compatriots sought to institutionalize their success through the creation of a volunteer association known as the Islamic Center, or *al-Mujamma al-Islami*. Following the model of the MB in Egypt, the Mujamma extended its influence by establishing mosques, schools, medical clinics, and youth centers, as well as conciliation committees to mediate conflicts between clans throughout the Gaza Strip. As the Mujamma gained political prominence during the 1970s, its members began to play influential roles within professional

associations and student unions (21). The Mujamma's success in integrating itself within all elements of public life in Gaza coincided with a milder tide of Islamism in the West Bank. This cemented the MB as formidable competition for the long-dominant secular parties that composed the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) (23).

The Palestinian branch of the MB, however, did not limit its activities to social service and political participation. Indeed, as Israeli experts Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela explain, "violence was built into the movement's worldview from its very inception. Like other Islamic movements, the Mujamma employed violence to impose Islamic norms on the population," particularly regarding alcohol and "women's modesty" (23). But with the emergence in Gaza of a rival militant Islamist group, the role of violence in the movement changed. Islamic Jihad, established in the Gaza Strip during the early 1980s, was formed by "brotherhood leaders who broke off from the organization in protest against its unwillingness to take on the Israeli occupation" (Hroub 32). Although Islamic Jihad built neither social nor political infrastructures to rival the MB itself, its embrace of armed resistance nevertheless presented a threat to the Brotherhood's leadership. According to Khaled Hroub, the emergence of Islamic Jihad "reactivated a tense internal dialogue concerning whether priority should go to social change and Islamic reform or to the liberation of Palestine" (Hroub). This internal debate resulted in a fundamental shift in the Brotherhood's ideology and political strategy. While social activity remained a pillar of the movement, the MB, led by Sheikh Yassin, established a network of military cells and, during the summer of 1985, adopted a decision calling on all members to organize and participate in demonstrations and clashes with occupation forces. Initially, MB cells confined themselves to low-profile attacks and the "liquidation" of Palestinians who collaborated with Israelis (35). The organization's role in resistance would transform, however, with the eruption of a spontaneous popular uprising—the first intifada.

The outbreak of the intifada catalyzed the creation of Hamas.

In early December 1987, small clashes among Palestinians, Israeli settlers, and the Israeli military catalyzed what had become, among the Palestinians, an increasing sense of frustration. On December 9, 1987, one day after the first mass demonstrations of the intifada, leaders of the MB in Gaza—including Sheikh Yassin and Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, who would later serve briefly as Yassin’s successor in Gaza—determined that the time had arrived to “assign top priority to the confrontation with the Israeli occupation” (39). Several days later, the leaders issued a communiqué describing the intifada as a rejection of Zionist occupation and proclaiming the uprising as a movement to “awaken the consciences of those among us who are gasping after a sick peace, after empty international conferences, after treasonous partial settlements like Camp David.” The communiqué called Islam “the solution and the alternative” and announced that “the Jews are committing Nazi crimes against our people and that they will drink from the same cup.” Yassin and his compatriots signed the document, “Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya ( Hamas ),” its Arabic acronym (Hroub 265). The movement, which was established as a separate front to protect the Brotherhood’s broader operations from Israeli action, immediately began expanding its mobilization networks and military apparatus to help drive the uprising (40). As demonstrations and clashes with the Israelis continued, Hamas released its charter in August 1988.

Still in effect today, Hamas’ charter, *The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement*, lays out an ideological framework combining the Brotherhood’s Islamist worldview with specific, national goals regarding Palestine. Hamas saw itself, rather than the secular PLO, as the true voice of the Palestinian people, and it sought to adopt the PLO’s brand of resistance as an Islamic cause. As Mishal and Sela explain, Hamas appropriated the national values of its secular rival, essentially casting the PLO charter of 1968 “in Islamic terminology and the Islamic belief system” (43). Hamas echoes the PLO’s call for an armed struggle to restore the Palestinian homeland in its entirety, while emphasizing its Islamic credentials. *The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement* opens by proclaiming Hamas as “one of the wings of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine” and later

declares that “Allah is its target, the Prophet is its example, and the Qur’an is its constitution; jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes” ( Hamas, *The Covenant* Articles 2 and 8). At the same time, Hamas makes a concerted effort to wed Islamist universalism with the Palestinians’ nationalist aspirations, declaring that “nationalism, from the point of view of the Islamic Resistance Movement, is part of the religious creed” (12).

The sacred nature of Palestinian land is the foundation of the bridge that Hamas forms between nationalism and Islam. According to its charter, “the land of Palestine is an Islamic *waqf* [endowment] consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day” (11). This consecration is deepened by Jerusalem’s role in Islamic history—the al-Aqsa Mosque is the faith’s third holiest site. No part of this land, according to the document, should be given up. The clearly stated belief that “neither a single Arab country nor all Arab countries ... neither any organization nor all of them, be they Palestinian or Arab, possess the right to [relinquish] any land,” remains a pillar of Hamas’ political platform to this day. These views serve as the ideological justification behind Hamas’ refusal to recognize Israel’s right to exist.

Hamas remains committed to the ultimate goal outlined in its charter: “to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine” (6). In this sense, “Palestine” refers not only to the West Bank and Gaza but to the British Mandate territory stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean, including all of present-day Israel. Hamas’ commitment is consistent with the ideology of the MB, which calls for the establishment of Islamic governance throughout the region. Furthermore, Hamas has given little indication that it would ever renounce control of all of Palestine as its ultimate long-term objective. Beneath this ideological banner, however, Hamas conducts a pragmatic political strategy. In the short to mid-term, the organization seeks to cement itself as the dominant political leadership within Palestinian society while weakening Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

## STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

Hamas' impressive rise to power and popularity since the first intifada stands as a testament to the strength and resiliency of its structural model. While it is impossible to ascertain the dynamics of leadership within the movement, analysts agree that "there appears to be a considerable degree of commitment to the principle of consultation in decision making" (Hroub 58). Since Israel's arrest of Sheikh Yassin in 1989,<sup>1</sup> this consultation has taken place among a decentralized leadership based both inside and outside the territories (Mishal and Sela 160). At the top of the leadership structure sit the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) and the political bureau. The composition of both bodies is largely unknown. According to Mathew Levitt, a former U.S. Treasury Department official whose book on Hamas relies greatly on Israeli intelligence, the Majlis al-Shura, based in Damascus, serves as the organization's "overarching political and decision making body" (9). A Hamas leader explained to an Israeli reporter that this body "includes representatives from the movement's four centers—the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, abroad and representatives of 300 Hamas leaders in Israeli jails" (Levitt 10). Beneath the Majlis al-Shura, the political bureau, which has also been based in Damascus since King Abdullah II expelled Hamas members from Jordan in 1999, serves as the organization's operational executive. The bureau supervises the movement's social and political activity within the territories through three committees—"da'wa, finance, and internal affairs"—exerting its control through coordinating bodies based in the West Bank and Gaza (Mishal and Sela 162). Hamas' military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, answers directly to political-bureau leadership in Damascus but is divided into regional networks and local cells that appear to act with some degree of tactical autonomy (Levitt 10).

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1. At the time of his arrest, Yassin served as Hamas' overall political leader. Hamas reorganized in reaction to his arrest, shifting power to leaders-in-exile. Yassin retained substantial influence within the movement—particularly following his release from prison in 1997—and he served as the organization's "spiritual leader" until he was killed in March 2004.

As host to both the Majlis al-Shura and the political bureau, Damascus is the nexus of Hamas' strategic decision making. After Yassin and other high-ranking members were arrested in 1989, the "external" leaders, exiles who reside outside the Palestinian territories and compose the political bureau, emerged to fill the vacuum in leadership. Compared with the movement's internal membership, which is currently led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and the more hard-line Mahmoud al-Zahar, Hamas' leadership-in-exile "consists of relatively young, educated technocrats who belong to the radical groups within Hamas." According to Mishal and Sela, the external members tend to subscribe to a brand of Islamism that calls for "revolution from above—rather than with religious revelation through ordinary processes of communal activity." Perhaps because they do not have to deal with the day-to-day realities in Palestine, the external leadership also takes a notably harder line concerning peace talks with Israel and relations with Fatah, the late Yasser Arafat's party that is now chaired by President Mahmoud Abbas (161). As this paper will discuss below, strategic differences between the internal and external leaderships have manifested themselves in the party's policy since the mid-1990s. With the Israeli assassination of Sheikh Yassin in March 2004 and Hamas' ascension to power following the 2006 elections, the divisions between the internal and external power bases have grown more apparent.

Since ascending to the bureau's top position in 1995, Khaled Meshaal appears to have strengthened the external leadership's control over Hamas' military wing, particularly after Yassin's death left him without charismatic internal competition. According to a U.S. Treasury Department report, Meshaal personally oversees military operations by maintaining close links with leaders in the territories (Levitt 45). The fundraising network that Meshaal oversees has roots in the United States, across Europe, in the Gulf States, and in Iran. Hamas has generally placed a high value on its operational independence, and the breadth of its network helps prevent the organization from becoming too dependent on individual sources of support. During the 1990s, the political

bureau established relationships with an extensive international network of pro-Palestinian charities, many of which, until a crackdown after September 11, 2001, were centered in Arab communities in the United States and Europe. The organization also receives significant funding from wealthy individual donors and companies, many based in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, donations from the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia in 2002, accounted for 40 to 50 percent of Hamas' budget (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Financial Sources"). Together, foreign charities, individual donors, and criminal enterprises provide Hamas with tens of millions of dollars each year. These funds generally support or are laundered through Hamas' social programs (Levitt 171).

While the charitable funds are critical to Hamas, the support the organization receives from state sponsors plays a far more important political role. According to Mathew Levitt, "Saudi Arabia and Iran account for the majority of the group's overall financial support" (172). Iranian funding, however, is unique in that it flows directly from the Iranian state treasury to Hamas' operational units, which means that the money is not funneled through charities or laundered through Hamas' social wing. According to a former Jordanian prime minister, "grassroots fundraising is really not enough for big Hamas operations. Most of the support [for such operations] is from Iran. Iran's money is more influential" (172). In 2003, Israeli government sources estimated Iranian support for Hamas to total \$3 million a year, and in 2002 Canadian intelligence placed Tehran's annual support somewhere between \$3 million and \$18 million. Other estimates have ranged from \$30 million to \$50 million a year (172). In truth, Iranian support almost certainly fluctuates according to conditions on the ground because Tehran, in its ongoing efforts to prevent a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, often pays Palestinian groups upon the completion of successful attacks (Eisenstadt 43). This military-specific financial aid is supplemented by the fact that Iran, in cooperation with Syria and Hezbollah, provides weapons and training to the Qassam Brigades (Levitt 177).

Despite Hamas' efforts to maintain funding from a variety of sources, there are indications that, even prior to the 2006 elections, there have been growing difficulties in obtaining funding, which have led Hamas to rely more heavily on Tehran in recent years. Levitt contends that Iranian support increased in 2004 to compensate for shortfalls resulting from a Saudi crackdown on terror funding and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, who was a former Hamas patron; this aid also helped Khaled Meshaal "reinvigorate" Hamas after the assassinations of Sheikh Yassin and his successor in Gaza, Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi (174). Journalist Graham Usher provides some idea of what that additional support may have amounted to, citing PA sources who claim that before its victory in the 2006 elections, Hamas received around \$10 million dollars a month from Iran (Usher, "Hamas Risen").

Whatever the precise level of funding prior to elections, Iranian support has increased tremendously since Israeli and Western governments placed the Hamas-run PA under economic siege. Unwilling to meet Western demands that it recognize Israel and forswear violence, Hamas turned to Iran for help in covering some of the PA's \$185 million monthly budget (Erlanger). In April 2006, at the conclusion of a conference in Tehran on the Palestinian conflict, the Iranian regime stepped forward with \$50 million dollars of additional aid to the embattled new government. By November, according to Mahmoud al-Zahar, Hamas' foreign minister in the PA, Iran's contributions reached a total of \$120 million ("Palestinian FM"). Most recently, Iran pledged another \$250 million during Ismail Haniyeh's visit to Tehran in December (Myre). Notably, Hamas' growing dependence on Iran coincides with a renewed aggressiveness in the regime's foreign policy; by the end of 2006, Hamas was being mentioned as a fourth member of the "resistance" axis of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah ("Coalitions").

Syria does not provide the level of financial support that flows from Iran, but the Assad regime's influence on the organization appears to be rising with the fortunes of its ally in Tehran and the external leadership's growing power within Hamas. However, Syria provides some funding to Hamas. This funding includes a 2002 of-

fer of direct financial aid in return for influence on the movement's military strategy; the regime also facilitates arms smuggling and appears to tolerate limited Hamas military training within its borders. Yet the most important element of Syria's support, however, is the safe haven it provides for Hamas' financial and operational headquarters in Damascus (Levitt 181). Through its alliances with Iran and Hezbollah, Syria enjoys strategic depth and asymmetric warfare capabilities that have thus far proven successful in deterring Israeli action against the political bureau's leadership and operational center. Thus, while the Israeli military ravages Hamas' infrastructure inside the territories, the movement's financial nexus, which is the heart of its operational capability, remains intact. The record of "targeted killings" carried out by Israel helps illustrate the relative safety the bureau enjoys in Damascus: Israeli intelligence attempted to assassinate Meshaal in Amman, Jordan in 1997; Israel succeeded in assassinating Sheikh Yassin in the Gaza Strip on March 22, 2004 ("Death of the Sheikh"); less than a month later, Israel killed Yassin's successor in Gaza, Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi (Tenning). However, despite an Israeli cabinet minister's threat that "the fate of Khaled Meshaal is the fate of Rantisi," Hamas' most powerful figure has remained untouched in Damascus (Bidwai).

The Syrian regime has also grown increasingly bold in its support of the movement. In the past, Syria generally made an effort to limit the profile of terrorist leaders operating in its capital, and kept meetings with Hamas, including at least one attended by the Iranian ambassador, secret. Over the last two years, however, the regime has strengthened its ties to Hamas "defiantly and openly." State-controlled media has provided heavy coverage of meetings between Meshaal and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and in July 2006, amidst intense international criticism over Syria's possible role in the kidnappings, conducted by Hamas and Hezbollah, that sparked incursions into Gaza and war in Lebanon, the regime allowed Meshaal to conduct an unprecedented press conference from a Damascus hotel ("Syria as Strategic Support").

While it is impossible to ascertain the exact extent to which the regimes in Tehran and Damascus shape Hamas' decision

making, cooperation among the three leaderships runs deep enough to warrant an examination of Iranian and Syrian interests in the Palestinian arena. Herein lays an important difference between al-Assad and the clerical leadership behind Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Syrian regime supports Hamas, Hezbollah, and smaller Palestinian terror groups as a means of exerting pressure on Israel to return the Golan Heights, which is Syrian land that Israel has occupied since its victory in the 1967 War, and to prevent any Israeli-Palestinian resolution that excludes Syria. Iran, on the other hand, maintains its militant proxies in the Israeli arena as a means of strengthening its influence and leverage in the region at the expense of the United States and its Arab neighbors. Thus, while Syria nearly reached a peace agreement with Israel in 2000 and remains publicly open to negotiations, Iran has little interest in establishing an accord with the Jewish state.

## STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Though Hamas' overarching strategy has remained consistent, its modus operandi has shifted in response to political change. Broadly speaking, these shifts can be grouped into three periods: Oslo, the second intifada, and the party's participation in the PA.

### The Oslo Period

During the Oslo peace process, Hamas found itself with no political stake in a potential resolution that it vehemently opposed. Hamas viewed itself, rather than the PLO, as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and its rival's signing of a peace agreement with Israel "confronted Hamas with nothing less than an existential problem" (Mishal and Sela 67). In addition to losing some of its cause, or at least mandate, to resist, Hamas now faced the threat that the PLO—now embodied in the PA—might violently suppress the movement with Israeli support. Without any place in the new PA, Hamas continued to view its role as vanguard

of jihad as the movement's main source of political legitimacy (Mishal and Sela 67). Hamas thus developed a strategy to protect its influence and derail the Oslo process: it would continue violent resistance against Israelis, but it would time attacks and the accompanying propaganda to create a popular impression that the action was in self-defense or in retaliation for Israel's killing of Palestinians (73). With most Palestinians supportive of the Oslo process and wary of Israel's practice of collective punishment, this strategy allowed Hamas to damage relations between Israel and the PA and weaken Israeli popular support for the peace process without losing domestic support or risking an extensive PA crackdown. Indeed, Sheikh Yassin and Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi later confirmed that attacks during the Oslo period were aimed to undermine the peace process and weaken the PA's legitimacy (Bloom).

Significantly, Hamas' strategic adjustment to Oslo took place just as the movement was strengthening its relationship with Hezbollah and Iran. In December 1992, Israel deported 415 Islamic activists to Lebanon, including Rantisi, Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud al-Zahar ("Profile: Hamas MP Ismail Haniyeh"). The deportees spent nearly a year in the south of Lebanon and took advantage of the opportunity "to learn about Hezbollah's experience in fighting the Israelis, the effect of suicide attacks, and the construction of car bombs" (Mishal and Sela 66). Shortly after the deportees returned to the territories, Hamas conducted its first suicide bombing.

The new tactic fit perfectly within Hamas' strategy. The organization used Israeli attacks on Palestinians, most notably settler Baruch Goldstein's massacre of 29 Palestinians at a Muslim shrine in Hebron during February 1994, to justify bloody bombings that targeted Israeli civilians (Hroub 246). While retaliation may have been one motivation, these attacks tended to occur at key moments during the Oslo process. Thus, less than a month before Israel and the PLO met in Cairo during May 1994 to sign the agreement that created the PA, the Qassam Brigades conducted two major suicide bombings in Israeli towns. Hamas claimed that the attacks were retaliatory in nature in response to the Hebron massacre that had

occurred six weeks earlier, but the operations were timed to put pressure on Yasser Arafat to take Hamas' interests into account at the talks in Cairo (Mishal and Sela 73). The practice of politically timed bombings would prove more influential in February and March 1996 when Hamas conducted several major suicide attacks that killed nearly 60 Israelis ("Who are Hamas?"). The attacks were carried out in the name of a recently killed bomb maker, but they contributed to the unexpected victory of Benjamin Netanyahu, a right-wing opponent of the peace process, in Israel's prime ministerial election that May (Bloom). The February and March attacks, which were organized by the external leadership and its loyal allies within the military apparatus in Gaza, took place during a period in which Iran is believed to have paid directly for individual terror attacks (Levitt 172). Although there is no public evidence to confirm his claims, Israel's director of military intelligence at the time accused Iran of instigating the attacks in a successful effort to bring down the pro-Oslo Labor party government (Mishal and Sela 211).

In addition to shaking the PLO-Israel accords, attacks carried out by the Qassam Brigades occasionally had intra-organization political ramifications. Indeed, it was during the Oslo period that the conflicting interests between Hamas' internal and external leaderships became visible. At the beginning of the Oslo process, many Hamas leaders within the territories called for a transition from violence to the establishment of an Islamic party that could participate openly in the new Palestinian political order. Without the influential presence of Sheikh Yassin, who remained in an Israeli prison, however, these internal activists were overpowered by the military apparatus and external leadership, both of which strongly opposed any turn from violence or accommodation with the PA (71). These tensions were again made manifest in 1995 when the outside leadership scuttled a deal with Israel—negotiated through the PA by Hamas leaders in the West Bank and Gaza—in which the movement would have halted terror attacks in exchange for Sheikh Yassin's freedom and an end to Israel's pursuit of Hamas members (74).

Yassin was released in 1997 after a botched Israeli assassination attempt on Khaled Meshaal in Amman, but by the summer of 1999, tensions within the movement seemed to be pulling toward a complete split. With Hamas losing public support from a mean of 18 percent in the mid-1990s to 10 percent in 1999 and suffering from Israeli and PA crackdowns, Sheikh Yassin began openly participating in meetings with the PLO. In so doing, Yassin essentially endorsed Arafat's leadership, which enraged Hamas hardliners but reflected Yassin's recognition of renewed popular support for the peace process at the time (Bloom).

### The Second Intifada

Hamas' ascent to political supremacy in the territories began with the outbreak of a second Palestinian uprising, known as the al-Aqsa intifada. On the eve of the 2000 Camp David II talks, Hamas appeared to be on its last legs. Arafat, with help from Israeli intelligence, had neutralized its military wing, dammed its flow of international funding, and imprisoned much of Hamas' internal leadership, including Rantisi and Muhammad Deif, Hamas' top military leader in Gaza (Hamas, "Communiqué No. 5"). With the breakdown at Camp David and Ariel Sharon's fateful visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque, however, the political order that had finally succeeded in subduing Hamas came crumbling down. Hamas and Fatah activists responded immediately to the hated decision to visit al-Aqsa; clashes began with a demonstration during his visit on September 28, 2000 and quickly spread throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas issued a series of communiqués encouraging supporters to join in an uprising and calling upon the PA to release imprisoned *mujahideen*, or holy warriors (Hamas, "Communiqué No. 4"). Arafat complied less than two weeks later, freeing hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including several top Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders ("Palestinians Free Militant Prisoners"). After three years of relative calm, the Islamist groups resumed suicide bombings in November. Three months later, with Sharon's election as prime minister, the bloody al-Aqsa intifada

continued in full force.

The conditions of the second intifada simplified Hamas' strategic considerations. With the collapse of Camp David, the movement no longer needed to concern itself with derailing the peace process, for the PA and Israeli leaderships had finished that job themselves. Furthermore, whereas Hamas had been forced to tread carefully during Oslo because of public opposition to a renewal of violence, the movement now found its two objectives in a perverse sort of harmony: strengthening its domestic political power and weakening Israeli resolve to continue the occupation. Three interrelated factors contributed to these operating conditions: Hamas' financial considerations, increasing competition among Palestinian factions, and popular attitudes towards attacks on Israeli civilians.

Still reeling from financial problems and suffering from low popularity, Hamas turned to suicide bombing as both a weapon and a promotional device. As Hamas and Islamic Jihad intensified attacks on Israeli civilians, polls showed growing Palestinian support for "martyrdom operations." Approval for these gruesome attacks hovered between 60 and 77 percent throughout most of the second intifada (PSR, "Public Opinion Poll #13"). Suicide bombings thus became a vehicle for Hamas to further undermine the PA and gain popularity vis-à-vis Fatah. As Professor Mia Bloom illustrates, "support for the bombings and radical Islamic groups increased after every suicide bombing, and Arafat's support declined." Indeed, Fatah soon felt compelled to organize its own suicide wing, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, in an effort to compete. In the first half of 2002, the intifada's bloodiest year, the al-Aqsa Brigades conducted more suicide attacks than Hamas and Islamic Jihad combined.<sup>2</sup> Smaller leftist factions entered the fray as well which resulted in a situation in which multiple organizations competed with increasingly brazen attacks in an effort to damage Israel and win domestic prestige; often two or more groups would issue conflicting claims of responsibility for the same attack. Hamas

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2. The al-Aqsa Brigades carried out seventeen suicide attacks during the first half of 2002, while Hamas and Islamic Jihad combined for eleven.

proved adept at handling the competition, and in April 2003 a poll showed that, for the first time, its popularity essentially equaled that of Fatah (Bloom).

Violence during the intifada raged in a vicious cycle. The Israeli military's actions in response to attacks, as well as its efforts to prevent additional bombings, resulted in heavy civilian casualties, and sharpened Palestinian anger and increasing support for suicide operations. External funding for suicide attacks helped the bloody process to carry on, and much of this support came from Iran. Tehran, according to Palestinian intelligence, provided Hamas' Qassam Brigades with \$400,000 in direct funding at the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada, a sum that probably served as mere financial lubricant. Estimates of annual Iranian support for Hamas ranged from \$3 million to \$50 million. Iran's Revolutionary Guard also trained Palestinians at a camp in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, and Tehran provided weapons to Fatah while continuing to bankroll its loyal Palestinian client, Islamic Jihad (Levitt 177). Whatever its ultimate level of direct funding to Hamas, Tehran's support bought it substantial influence on the movement's leadership. A Palestinian intelligence report from 2001 states that Iran sent messages to Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders stating, "they must not allow a calming down at this period." The message led to a meeting in Damascus between Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah officials, who discussed joint operations and the channeling of Iranian money to the Palestinian groups (174).

While it is difficult to tell whether Iran's pressure led Hamas to action that it would otherwise not have taken, there is no question that Tehran used its influence to actively discourage any efforts to reduce bloodshed. As Dennis Ross notes, "at moments of promise—if only for quiet—it is Iran that pushes the hardest to make sure the quiet does not last" (Ross). Syria also played a role in sabotaging ceasefire talks. In 2002, the Syrian regime pressured Hamas and other Damascus-based groups not to agree to any deal that halted suicide attacks, while reportedly offering Hamas direct funding if it increased its level of operations (Levitt 181). Evidence suggests that these efforts may have paid off. Throughout

the intifada, Arafat worked persistently to reach an agreement with Hamas that would end the movement's suicide attacks. Hamas leaders within the territories agreed to six ceasefires between the outbreak of the uprising and June 2003, but each disintegrated, either due to objection from the external leadership or continuing Israeli assassination attempts (Usher, "The New Hamas"). Hamas did not commit to an extended ceasefire until the spring of 2005.

The current *tahdiyya* (calm) began in March 2005, but its roots lie in a strategic reassessment within Hamas that began nearly two years earlier. According to journalist Graham Usher, in the weeks before his assassination in March 2004, Sheikh Yassin presented a new platform for the movement that incorporated changing conditions affecting the Palestinian arena. Three strategically significant developments had occurred during the first three years of the al-Aqsa intifada. On the international front, the initiation of the American-led "War on Terror" placed Hamas under intense financial and political pressure. Domestically, Hamas' popularity had grown substantially as Fatah's had fallen, which was a reflection of Hamas' leading role in the intifada, its reinvigorated social programs, and Fatah's corruption and administrative impotence. Finally, in Israel, Sharon was moving forward with plans to unilaterally disengage from the Gaza Strip. Faced with this blend of threat and opportunity, Yassin developed a strategy that would capitalize on the withdrawal while conferring the organization with additional political legitimacy. In an effort to earn popular credit for the disengagement without actually endangering it, Hamas would increase resistance in Gaza while halting suicide attacks within Israel. If the Israeli withdrawal commenced, Hamas would commit with the PA to a more extensive ceasefire and participate for the first time in elections, in exchange for a power sharing agreement in post-withdrawal Gaza and "proportional" representation in the PLO. These principles would come to be embodied in an agreement negotiated in Cairo during March 2005 (Usher, "The New Hamas").

While Israel's back-to-back assassinations of Yassin and Rantisi drove Hamas closer to its Iranian ally, the political bureau ultimately remained true to Yassin's plan. The killings left the

movement with a vacuum of internal leadership at a precarious moment; the United States, Britain, Israel, and the PA were all moving to freeze the accounts of Islamic charities linked to Hamas, and financial support from Arab states slowed to a trickle due to Hussein's overthrow and a prevailing sense of impatience in Arab capitals with the ineffectual intifada (Usher, "The New Hamas"). Khaled Meshaal, officially appointed the movement's overall leader after Yassin's death, reacted to this dual challenge by seeking greater Iranian support. The movement received additional funding from Tehran in May 2004 and, according to Levitt, Meshaal sought to establish "a direct channel" to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in an effort to "reinvigorate Hamas' operational cells" (Levitt 176). Whatever the accuracy of that assertion, the Qassam Brigades were sufficiently invigorated in August 2004 to kill 16 Israelis in retaliation for the assassinations ("Twin Bus Bombs").

Following that double-suicide attack, the external leadership began to implement Yassin's strategy. After reaching the Cairo agreement with the PA in March 2005, Hamas halted suicide attacks within Israel while intensifying operations in the Gaza Strip. The plan worked. As Israel withdrew from Gaza in September 2005, a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research showed that 84 percent of Palestinians saw the disengagement as a victory for the armed resistance, with Hamas receiving the largest share of the credit (PSR, "Public Opinion Poll #17"). In national elections four months later, Hamas capitalized on its popularity and Fatah's reputation for corruption, winning control of a majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council.

### Participation in the Palestinian Authority

Together, Hamas' election victory and the international aid embargo that ensued have placed unprecedented pressure on the bridge that connects the movement's strategies with its ultimate ideological objectives. Thus, over the course of 2006, the fundamental tensions, conflicts of interest, and contradictions within the movement have been revealed and exacerbated. Three

interrelated events catalyzed these developments: the international demand that Hamas recognize Israel and renounce violence; intra-movement disagreement over a unity government with Fatah; and Hamas' role in the kidnapping of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit outside Gaza in June 2006.

For years, Hamas leaders have remained publicly ambiguous regarding the possibility of recognizing Israel. The movement's charter clearly states Hamas' goal of uniting all of Palestine under Islam, and its leadership generally does not speak of compromise beyond the possibility of a *hudna* (long term truce), which does not amount to an acknowledgement of Israel's right to exist. However, leaders within the organization have occasionally hinted that, under the right conditions, Hamas would consider a full recognition. Sheikh Ahmad Hajj Ali, a Hamas legislator and reported member of the Majlis al-Shura, has stated that "if Israel were to agree with our internationally recognized rights—including the refugees' right of return—the Shura Council would seriously consider recognizing Israel in the interests of world peace" (Usher, "Hamas Risen"). Even Meshaal has, in the past, sent signals of flexibility, telling members of the Arab League in 2005 that "the recognition of Israel is perhaps possible in the future were Israel to recognize the [national] rights of the Palestinian people" (Usher, "Hamas Risen").

Since their victory in the elections, however, Hamas leaders have universally rejected the possibility of recognizing Israel. PA Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar, echoing Hamas' charter, laid out the movement's unified position:

Hamas will not recognize Israel no matter what the reasons. Hamas has a strong conviction that Israeli power is not eternal and can be defeated. If not today, then tomorrow. Why recognize Israel and deprive the rising generations from liberating all Palestinian territories and not only those of June 5, 1967? (Moubayed).

The international community has responded to this refusal by withholding aid from the Hamas-led government. Israel no longer

transfers the \$50 million it collects each month on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, and Western countries have cut off nearly \$1 billion in direct aid to the PLO. Both Israel and the “Quartet” of Middle East negotiators—the United States, the European Union, Russia and the UN—have demanded that Hamas recognize Israel, renounce violence, and accept previous PLO agreements with Israel in exchange for a resumption of international aid to the Palestinian government.

The aid embargo, however, has failed to change Hamas’ stance and, by forcing the organization to rely on Iranian support, may be making chances for moderation more remote. Iran has no interest in Hamas’ recognition of Israel, and the regime appears to be buying itself growing leverage within the movement. As of November 2006, Iran had contributed \$120 million to the Hamas-led government and, in al-Zahar’s words, they “told us that they will provide more financial help” (“Palestinian FM”). A month later, Tehran pledged another \$250 million. Hamas, in return, is making clear where its loyalties lie. On December 8<sup>th</sup>, speaking at Friday prayers in Tehran, Prime Minister Haniyeh declared, “We will never recognize the usurping Zionist regime... We are standing by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and with this country we will resist American and Zionist pressures” (“Haniya Vows”). Whatever ideological or long-term strategic objective this stance may serve, however, it is placing a tremendous burden on Palestinians within the territories. Iranian funding cannot cover the salaries of government workers who, in a society that has yet to begin recovering from the second intifada, compose the bulk of the Palestinian workforce.

While Hamas’ leaders appear united in their refusal to recognize Israel, the movement’s actions in response to the economic siege and worsening relations with Fatah reveal deep divisions and a lack of coherent strategy. After failing in March to induce Fatah to join its cabinet, Hamas members in the territories—apparently without the full support of the political bureau—began trying in May to negotiate terms with Fatah to form a national unity government that would end, or at least ease, the aid embargo.

The talks, which followed an outline drawn up by members of both organizations who are imprisoned in Israeli jails, sought to establish a cabinet composed of both parties based on a platform that implicitly, and ambiguously, recognized Israel. On July 25, 2006 just as Hamas' internal leadership appeared ready to sign an agreement that would call for a halt to attacks inside Israel and movement toward a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, a group of Palestinian militants killed two Israeli soldiers and kidnapped Corporal Shalit, carrying him back into Gaza through a hidden tunnel ("Crisis for Hamas"). Members of the Qassam Brigades participated in the attack and released a statement after its successful completion, sending a revealing wave through Hamas ranks. Almost immediately, it became apparent that the attack had been ordered from or approved by Hamas' external leadership, without the knowledge of Prime Minister Haniyeh or his internal allies. As a pure power play, the move worked brilliantly. The attack reasserted Meshaal as the ultimate leader within Hamas, and the following Israeli invasion of Gaza upset any chances of implementing the unified platform that Hamas' internal leadership quietly signed on June 27<sup>th</sup> (McGreal).

As of February 2007, repeated attempts to negotiate an exchange for Shalit's release have fallen through. As is the case with obstructing the unity government, continued obstinacy probably serves the political bureau's own interest, particularly as leverage in an effort to bring Hamas into the PLO on favorable terms. Regarding Shalit in particular, however, evidence points to Iranian and Syrian involvement as well. In late July, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak claimed he had nearly completed negotiations for Shalit's release, only to have "other parties" derail the deal (Ross). Mubarak's veiled reference probably alludes to Iran or Syria (or both countries), both of whom have regional rivalries with Egypt as well as an interest in maintaining tension between Israel and the Palestinians. According to the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Tehran prevented the head of Egyptian intelligence from completing a similar deal in September by bribing Meshaal with \$50 million (Butcher). True or not, both the Egyptian and Israeli

claims point to a larger confluence of short and medium term interests between Iran, Syria, and Hamas' external leadership. All three actors appear bent on maintaining instability in the Palestine-Israel arena, perhaps with an eye to renewed violence.

There is little indication that Khaled Meshaal's recent agreement to form a unity government with Fatah represents a moderation in the organization's strategy. Negotiating under Saudi auspices in the holy city of Mecca, Meshaal and Mahmoud Abbas struck a deal in early February, in principle at least, to create a coalition government that would "respect" previous PLO treaties. The agreement brought a halt to weeks of inter-party violence that appear to have strengthened Hamas' hand; against Washington's urging, Abbas agreed to a deal in which Hamas does not appear to have met any of the international community's demands—"respect," in the eyes of the Quartet, does not amount to acceptance. Hamas would also retain a dominant role in government, holding nine cabinet ministries—including Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh—while leaving six to Fatah and another four to other factions and independents ("Text of Mecca Accord"). As of late February, the parties had yet to agree on specific candidates for every ministry, leaving many to question whether the new government would crumble before taking office. Moreover, even if Hamas and Fatah do ultimately agree on the specifics of their agreement, it does not appear that the new government would receive much of the funding currently withheld by Israel and the West.

For Hamas' leadership, there is little to lose from the Mecca deal. In addition to solidifying its role as the most powerful element within the Palestinian Authority, the agreement calls for reforming the PLO in order to incorporate Hamas, which is an element of the aforementioned 2005 Cairo agreement that has thus far remained unfulfilled. As part of this agreement, the PLO would hold new elections for its governing council, leaving the door open for Hamas to take leadership of the organization that the international community views as the ultimate representative of the Palestinian people (Yaghi, "Hamas' Victory"). Significantly, the accord also reportedly comes with a promise of \$1 billion in Saudi funding

to the PA. Saudi leadership hopes this support will weaken Iran's influence within Hamas. Taken together, the agreement leaves the political bureau in an enviable position: if other countries provide substantial aid and Fatah follows through on its promise to reform the PLO, Hamas could gain tremendous additional power within the Palestinian arena. If, as seems more likely, the economic embargo continues and little movement is made regarding the PLO, Hamas can let the Mecca accord crumble, which would displace this blame onto the United States and Israel to take the blame.

Should Hamas and Fatah fail to establish and maintain a coalition government, the political bureau may shift toward more aggressive tactics. Meshaal, for his part, sent mixed signals in the months preceding the Mecca accord. Speaking to reporters in Cairo on November 25, 2006, Meshaal gave Abbas a green light negotiate with Israel, calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders "without settlements, big or small" ("Hamas Chief"). While some observers described Meshaal's comments as indicative of peaceful intentions, it is unwise to ignore the underlying threat. In the same statement, Meshaal set a 6-month deadline for reaching international agreement on a Palestinian state, warning, "if our demands are not met, the Palestinian people will close all political files and launch a third intifada" ("Hamas Chief"). If Meshaal's encouragement of negotiations proves sincere, it would mark a historic shift in policy. A return to the 1967 borders, however, is a lofty goal, and Meshaal's threat leaves little time. More likely, the Hamas leader is setting goals that he knows Abbas cannot reach, particularly since Meshaal himself can obstruct progress on the unity government and Shalit's release. If, as seems likely, the Mecca accord breaks down and peace talks yield little, the political bureau will weigh the option of renewed violence. If frustration in the Palestinian streets reaches a level similar to that of September 11, 2000, that option will prove very tempting.

## CONCLUSION

Hamas' electoral victory and the economic siege that followed

broke open a fault line that had been forming for over a decade within the organization's leadership. On one side of this divide stand the pragmatists within the West Bank and Gaza who are loyal to the movement but are worried by the worsening conditions around them. On the other side stand the exiles in Damascus who are less willing to compromise and tend to gravitate toward foreign allies.

Since the death of Sheikh Yassin, Khaled Meshaal has maneuvered deftly, securing the funding necessary to maintain the organization while strengthening the political bureau's role as Hamas' strategic leadership. So long as Meshaal and his fellow exiles remain allied with Syria, dependent on Iran, and in control of Hamas, the organization will never willingly recognize Israel or forfeit the option of armed resistance. In analyzing the organization's future, two questions thus remain: could pragmatic internal leaders wrest control from Damascus? If not, could the external leadership be compelled to recognize Israel and cooperate in the peace process?

Both control over foreign funding and dominance of military wing's chain of command guarantee that the political bureau will remain dominant within Hamas in the future. It is possible that pragmatic internal leaders enjoy more popular support, but their power is based in social programs that depend upon the foreign funding raised and controlled by the external leadership. Elected leaders within the territories could have capitalized on their role in the PA to challenge the political bureau's dominance, but Haniyeh's government has proven impotent in the face of an economic siege and violent civil strife. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the exiled leadership's unrivaled influence over the Qassam Brigades. So long as the decision to wage war is based in Damascus, so too will be the decision to make peace.

What, then, are the prospects for pressuring the political bureau to moderate? The resilience of Hamas' popular standing and the intransigence of its foreign supporters suggest that there is little chance that the political bureau will moderate. Recent polling reveals that the continuing blockade of international aid has not dealt a significant blow to Hamas' popularity or increased

that of Fatah. According to a December 2006 poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, the parties would run neck and neck in a hypothetical new round of elections (PSR, "Public Opinion Poll #22"). Moreover, a similar poll in September suggested that 67 percent of Palestinians do not believe Hamas should submit to pressure to recognize Israel, and a majority currently supports attacks on Israeli civilians (PSR, "Public Opinion Poll #21"). Meanwhile, the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance has grown more powerful in recent months, and Tehran has demonstrated its willingness to provide Hamas with substantial funding. The reported Saudi pledge of \$1 billion to a Hamas-Fatah unity government could prove an important step toward weakening Iran's influence within Hamas, but it remains unclear whether such a government has the capabilities to establish itself. In the absence of meaningful progress on that front, foreign allies and domestic frustration make Hamas' external leadership more likely to respond to international pressure with a new intifada than to moderate.

As tensions within the Palestinian territories remain dangerously high, it is imperative that the international community operates with a better understanding of Hamas' structure, strategy, and political considerations. The American and Israeli-led response to Hamas' election victory appears likely to end up a complete strategic failure. While the economic siege has succeeded in rendering the Hamas-led government ineffectual, Palestinians are blaming Israel and the United States for the worsening conditions. More importantly, the embargo has pushed Hamas' leadership closer to Iran, providing Ahmadinejad and his Syrian allies additional influence on the Palestinian front. Concerned international leaders should take Meshaal's threat of a third intifada very seriously, but should also remain cognizant of Hamas' sensitivity to public opinion. If Palestinians begin to place real faith in a peace process, it will be difficult for Hamas' hardliners to justify a resumption of bloodshed. Should conditions worsen and hopes remain dim, however, the political bureau will again see violence as an effective tool to build domestic strength while weakening Israeli resolve.

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