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MORE THAN A TRUCE: THE COLD PEACE BETWEEN THE PLO AND HAMAS

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Field Cooperation

In the shadow of the Oslo accords, a second peace braced the Middle East, one which offers a unique perspective on the dynamics of the first. In mid-September 1993, the main branch of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Al-Fatah, struck a deal with its fundamentalist rival, Hamas, ending their long-standing war. The agreement was reached only days after the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles was signed, but it did not receive nearly as much press. For the most part, the pact was portrayed simply as a temporary truce between battle-weary street gangs in an obscure Gaza prison. Remarkably, though, it has since been honored with little interruption even as the Israel-PLO accord fumbled over the year. More important, the cease-fire proved to be just the surface of what amounts to an ardent and ongoing PLO campaign to court Hamas in the wake of the emerging Palestinian Autonomy.

As a result, an entirely new relationship has developed between the PLO and Hamas, one far more complex and symbiotic than the violent feud of the past. This relationship seems to have ramifi-

cations in every sphere of Palestinian self-government, from the ideological posturing of the PLO to the question of how PLO police plan to deal with Hamas terrorists. Though it started with a truce signed in September and again in April 1994, the relationship has taken the form of clandestine meetings and public appeals by the PLO, political bargaining, and what officials on both sides call "field cooperation" between Fatah and Hamas militaries.

Very little about the PLO-Hamas cooperation was made clear when the cease-fires were first publicized. It seemed that the two groups had reached an understanding, if not a meeting of the minds, on how to coexist in a Palestinian entity. But officials in both groups say it was nothing of the sort. In fact, the PLO's peaceful gesture towards Hamas appears more likely to be its latest and most devastating attempt to defeat the fundamentalist movement in their ongoing war, if interviews with PLO and Hamas members by this writer are any indication. Despite pleas by Israel to control Hamas, and the secret style in which the PLO-Hamas agreements were reached, Arafat has

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actually tried to publicize the agreement as much as possible. In fact, the PLO has tried publicly to play down the ideological differences between both groups and to play up any friendly gestures between them. This conciliatory posturing increased dramatically with Arafat's arrival in Gaza. Hamas, on the other hand, has tried with equal vigor to disassociate itself publicly from the PLO, while eagerly courting favor with the PLO police.

Yet for all that the agreement remains cold and complex, the truce between both groups appears at least as solid as the Oslo accord. There have been almost no clashes between PLO and Hamas factions since they signed an official truce in April, and very few since September. Despite repeated Israeli requests to seize Hamas terrorists and their weapons, Hamas officials are openly confident that the PLO will not challenge their military core or break the cease-fire. The PLO has made clear that Hamas will play a significant part in the Palestinian authority. While Israelis and Palestinian moderates remain apprehensive, the PLO-Hamas truce continues.

Arafat Courts Hamas

From the onset, Arafat made the first move in courting Hamas, and the relationship has followed that cat and mouse pattern ever since. In the winter of 1993, while the PLO had entered into negotiations with Israel, Arafat first tried to reach out to Hamas. On January 4th, in the wake of violent clashes between Fatah and Hamas in Gaza, Arafat called for a meeting between the two groups. He sent his top diplomatic aide Nasser Yussuf to Khartoum to meet with the Syrian-based Hamas leader Mussa Abu Marzuq. The two drafted and signed a treaty aimed at ending violence, improving communication between Tunis and the territories, and "working together" in the Intifada. But the pact was short-lived. Two weeks later, Hamas officially nullified the agreement. The fundamentalists blamed Arafat's criticism of Hamas at an appearance in Cairo around that time. Arafat, it seemed, had betrayed them.

But Arafat's campaign to court Hamas had just begun. In the first week of September 1993, just as the Israel-PLO agreement was about to be signed, the PLO and Israeli intelligence reported that Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the jailed founder of Hamas, announced he supports "Arafat's steps to recover part of Palestine." Yassin has since denied the statement. Still, Arafat reportedly began a written correspondence with Yassin in his prison cell. Meanwhile, the PLO

launched an exhaustive campaign, still underway, to secure Yassin's release from prison, constantly raising the issue with Israel. In addition, the PLO took pains to clarify that Hamas would now be allowed to participate in the planned Palestinian elections and that Yassin approved of the idea (a position Yassin has confirmed). But this exchange of statements amounted to little more than ice-breaking between Yassin and Arafat.

The first real agreement between the movements as a whole was reached on September 16, 1993, in the Kfar Younah prison in Gaza. Imprisoned activists of Hamas and Fatah agreed to end violence between the two groups and to cooperate on some level. The details were left vague; some say deliberately so. But both Hamas and the PLO have since confirmed that the agreement was reached and supported (the PLO said even encouraged) by the leadership of the two groups. Hamas, however, did not acknowledge the agreement until four months after it was signed.

On the other hand, the PLO-controlled Voice of Palestine radio station immediately broadcast what it called the "Document of Honor" which the PLO claimed was signed in the prison. According to the station, the document declared that "Agreement has been reached between Fatah and Hamas on a Document of Honor binding both sides to ban internecine fighting and violence and guaranteeing the freedom of expression." That pledge has been largely upheld, with the exception of some violent clashes between low-level gangs of Fatah and Hamas youth in April.

The PLO sought something beyond a mere cease-fire, but Hamas did not. When Arafat requested a conference between PLO leaders and Hamas activists, Hamas flatly refused.

Still, a series of secret meetings followed, mostly in Amman, Jordan, aimed, according to PLO officials, at forging some kind of relationship between the two movements. One PLO official told the *Long Island Jewish World* that these "looked like informal social gatherings, but I guess you can say they did not discuss the World Cup."

For example, Ibrahim Ghousheh, one of the Hamas leaders in Amman, told the *Jewish World* he was approached by Hani Al Hassan, a high-ranking PLO official, in a community center. Hassan tried to convince the Hamas leader that he opposed the PLO-Israel accord and that Hamas and the PLO actually have a lot in common, according to Ghousheh's recollection. At the time, Ghousheh recalled, he was skeptical but open to the possibility of cooperation on some level with the PLO. Later, however, he decided that the Al

Hassan visit was a trick, that "he is still really with Arafat." Nevertheless, Ghousheh confirmed that similar meetings took place between Hamas activists and PLO committee members, but that "no political agreement was reached." The two sides did, however, reach a "mutual understanding to avoid confrontation," Ghousheh said. That understanding was soon made official.

When violence between a few youthful bands of the Fatah Hawks and Hamas's military wing flared up again in April 1994, the two groups arranged a meeting in Gaza. On April 21, Rashid Abu Shahak, a Fatah leader in Gaza, signed a written peace treaty with Mahmoud Al Zahhar, the head of Iz al-din al-Qassam, Hamas's military wing. Unlike the September truce, this treaty was publicly endorsed by both the PLO and Hamas leadership abroad. More meetings between the Fatah Hawks and Hamas ensued at the Islamic University in Gaza.

Arafat then sent delegates to Amman in an effort to set up an official PLO-Hamas dialogue on a higher level. Hamas, however, was not ready for such a gesture. It was, however, eager to make contact with the Palestinian police.

Inviting the Police Chief for Dinner

In mid-May, Al Zahhar invited a local police chief to his house for dinner, and requested that Hamas members be allowed into the Palestinian police force. So far, the PLO has tried to keep fundamentalists out of its force, but a few Hamas members were recently drafted into the first phase of police training and two Hamas members were expelled from the force, lending to the suspicion that more remain inside. The *Washington Post* (1 May 1994) reported that, when asked if the PLO police will be open to Hamas members, PLO officials replied that its institutions will be open to all people.

When Arafat arrived in Gaza, he publicly called for "cooperation with Hamas." He then arranged a meeting between Nasser Yussuf and Al Zahhar, and another meeting between Al Zahhar and high-ranking Palestinian policemen.

In its most dramatic good-will gesture, the PLO offered Hamas officials four seats in the Palestinian National Council. Hamas reviewed the proposal and, according to Ghousheh, rejected the offer within twenty-four hours. But Hamas leader Yassin announced that Hamas will participate in the proposed general elections. The move marked a somewhat conciliatory gesture coming from a group that had at one point

vowed to stay out of the autonomy arrangement altogether.

Now a shaky but substantial relationship had been achieved. On the official level, the PLO continues to try to persuade Hamas officials to participate, in a limited fashion, in the Palestinian Authority and Hamas continues to publicly insist on limited involvement. Still, the correspondence between the two groups continues, according to Ghousheh and Khalil Foutah, deputy director of the PLO's Washington office.

On the ground, the truce between Fatah and Hamas activists remains in full force. In addition, Hamas has formed key diplomatic ties with the Palestinian police through the meetings attended by Al Zahhar. Taken as a whole, it appears that steps by both groups are ensuring that violence on the ground is becoming a smaller possibility.

Arafat's Strategy

One motive that can clearly be drawn from these events is that the PLO and Hamas want to avoid a civil war. The Hamas military wing, Iz al-din al-Qassam, is made up of only about 100 armed men, but the violent core has maintained secret terrorist activities for years despite Israeli attempts to eradicate it. "It is a very fierce group, and Arafat does not want to face them," noted Roni Shaked, Arab affairs writer for *Yediot Aharonot* and author of a book awaiting publication, on Hamas. In March, Iz al-din al-Qassam assassinated the commander of the Red Star faction of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Still, most observers believe that Hamas gains even more from the truce. "We want to avoid civil war and fight the PLO in a democratic way," Ghousheh told this writer. With more trained men, more money and more arms, the PLO might well annihilate Hamas in a civil war. In any event, a confrontation would likely incur casualties on both sides, hence the truce.

But that hardly explains the PLO's zealous attempts to bring Hamas into the Palestinian political structure while, at the same time, privately expressing hope, in interviews with this writer and others, that this will lead to Hamas's disintegration. Nor does it explain the way the PLO police has pursued public diplomatic ties with Hamas while aggressively trying to expel fundamentalists from its ranks. In short, while the PLO still views Hamas as a rival, Arafat seems eager to publicly embrace — not just forgive — Hamas. Can a mere desire to aver civil war explain the PLO's public gestures to Hamas?

Actually, much more can be learned about Arafat's

strategy from the way in which the PLO has tried to publicize its relationship with Hamas. From the onset, the PLO has tried to create as much as possible the appearance of a genuine meeting of the minds between the PLO and Hamas, not just a truce. Moreover, Hamas has denied nearly every public gesture the PLO claims has been made between the two sides. Apparently, there is some political benefit for the PLO from the public appearance of a real peace with Hamas.

Evidence of this PLO strategy emerges from every phase of the PLO-Hamas courtship: When the truce between Fatah and Hamas activists was reached in Gaza, the PLO immediately released the story to the Associated Press. But far more intriguing, the PLO released the "Document of Honor" under somewhat questionable circumstances. Although Hamas officials eventually confirmed that an agreement was reached, they continue to vehemently deny that any document was signed. In addition, PLO officials at the United Nations denied that an actual piece of paper was signed, in an interview with the *Jewish World*. Furthermore, PLO officials would have us believe that on September 16th, the two gangs signed a document in the middle of the Gaza prison and yet managed to send it to Tunis, where the PLO office released it to the Algiers-based Voice of Palestine, where it was broadcast, all in a mere two days. Moreover, the paper is entitled "Document of Honor," and it speaks in flowing terms about the common heritage and bonds between the two warring gangs, and of the common interest in the wake of "new events," presumably the peace accords. Yet the signers were primarily heads of street gangs who had clashed violently until that moment. Nothing in the posturing of Hamas before or since would suggest it wanted anything more than a simple cease-fire. Moreover, Hamas had emphatically attacked the accord during that time, lending more suspicion to the notion that a document would refer to the Oslo accords in such accepting terms.

In addition to the purported document, PLO officials claimed that Sheikh Yassin had expressed support for Arafat. Yet Yassin to this day asserts that, while there was a correspondence between the two leaders, he never expressed anything but opposition to Arafat and the Oslo accord in general. In what amounts to a political slap in the face for Arafat, Yassin continues to claim that he does not want to leave his prison cell, despite (and probably because of) Arafat's continued effort to free him.

Further, while PLO adviser Anees Barghouti told the *Long Island Jewish World* and the *Washington*

Jewish Week that the Amman meetings were leading to some PLO-Hamas understanding, Ghousheh of Hamas told this writer that nothing beyond a truce was achieved.

Silence has also been a form of reconciliation. While Hamas continues to denounce the PLO, since Arafat's arrival in Gaza the new PLO-controlled radio station has largely refrained from criticism of Hamas.

PLO officials also continue to focus on ideological links between the two groups, while Hamas officials deny that any such links exist. "We do not disagree with [Hamas]," Muin Shreim, spokesman for the Palestine Mission at the UN, told the *Long Island Jewish World*. "Our tactics might vary, our schedule might vary. We believe the agreement is the first step towards a Palestinian State. We vary in how many steps."

"We are trying to find a common denominator, the elements that we share and in which we can cooperate to promote political stability and social development in Gaza," said Tawfik Abu Khousah, the head of the Fatah Hawks, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*. Khalil Foutah, a spokesman for the PLO office in Washington, added that "There is some common ground between the PLO and Hamas. Not with the Communist faction, but with our main PLO factions. Many of us are Islamic and have Islamic principals."

But Ghousheh asserted "there is no ideological agreement" between the PLO and Hamas. In fact, Ghousheh and other Hamas leaders publicly attacked Arafat for violating key edicts of Islam by seeking peace with Israel.

PLO Motives

One major reason that the PLO is trying so hard to demonstrate its deep ties with Hamas may well be Hamas's ideological hold on the Palestinian people. As PLO Press Secretary Marwan Kanfani told the *Long Island Jewish World*, "they enjoy some support among the people." Actually, Israeli experts, including Shaked, estimate the amount of Palestinian Hamas supporters at somewhere between 20 and 30 percent.

From the PLO's attempts to show ideological bonds, and its efforts to invite Hamas officials into the Palestinian Authority, it appears PLO officials believe acceptance by Hamas could provide an Islamic or nationalist stamp of approval.

But a slightly less obvious, and somewhat more sinister, motive may be at hand, as Hamas officials suspect. If Hamas lends any ideological legitimacy to the PLO, Hamas as a political movement might cease

to have a purpose. After all, the PLO already has administrative primacy in the territories. If it can obtain ideological primacy as well, the logic goes, who needs Hamas?

Certainly, the PLO's actions seem to have been following such a model, what Shaked calls the "Vietnam model" of befriending the enemy with the ultimate purpose of destroying it. After all, the PLO has repeatedly attempted to portray Hamas as endorsing its authority, while it has tried (albeit ineffectively) to keep Hamas out of inner circles such as the police. The PLO's efforts to bring Hamas into its government, in a limited fashion of course, may well be a further attempt to obliterate Hamas's political purpose. After all, that would have Hamas participating in the very political system it so vehemently opposes and claims will fail.

Consider the remarks of Arafat adviser Anees Barghouti: "I believe Hamas will begin to disappear once the democratic process gets underway and people see the effects of the political system. Their power will diminish greatly" (*Jewish World*).

Along the same lines, Ghousheh says he sees the folly in Hamas's participation in the very autonomous system it so vehemently opposes. That, he said, is why Hamas insists "in staying out of the mechanism of the autonomy, like the Council, and participating only in general elections."

Hamas Strategy

Because Hamas views the PLO's attempts at public reconciliation as a threat, it has avoided anything that could be mistaken for an endorsement of Arafat's de facto government. Yassin announced recently that Hamas forbids any participation in the Palestinian National Council, and would limit any political involvement to the elections. In short, if the PLO is seeking ideological legitimacy from Hamas, Arafat is in for a disappointment.

Yet just as Hamas is trying to avoid any political gestures, it has been trying to court favorable ties with the Palestinian police. In other words, for Hamas, the motive seems to be purely military. From the onset, Hamas has sought nothing more than a cease-fire with Arafat's military wings, be they Fatah, the Fatah Hawks or, most recently, the Palestinian police.

Hamas officials hope that the PLO police will ignore Israeli pleas to clamp down on Hamas terrorists. Two weeks after Al Zahhar had his last meeting with the Palestinian police, Ghousheh told this writer: "I know that many of the Palestinian police are sympathet-

ic. I am sure they will not turn against their people. Arafat knows what will happen if he crosses that red line."

Further emphasizing those ties, Al Zahhar himself declared that the police are "our brethren, our family, there is a moral relationship between the Palestinian policemen and the Hamas."

Possible Outcomes

The Palestinian police briefly arrested and then released several Hamas terrorists and has reportedly seized several others for crimes against fellow Palestinians. But the PLO continues to ignore Israeli pleas to seize the weapons of Hamas terrorists, to raid terrorist cells, and, in general, to take an affirmative position against terror directed at Israel. For the most part, Hamas's core, Iz al-din al-Qassam, is operating and growing under the noses of the PLO administration.

While the PLO has proved it is capable of arresting Hamas terrorists in certain incidents, Israeli officials do not yet know whether PLO police will work with Israeli authorities on this issue.

Shaked believes that Arafat ultimately hopes Hamas terror will continue. "The PLO needs Hamas. The Hamas terrorism puts pressure on the Israelis to cave in. That's what led to the drawbacks."

Others simply raise the question of whether Palestinian police will hide Hamas terrorists after they have already hit Israeli targets and fled back into the territories. Though the PLO has not officially declared that terrorists will be protected, their statements on the issue might appear weak in the eyes of wary Israelis. For example, when asked if police will seize fugitive terrorists, Barghouti told the *Jewish World* and the *Washington Jewish Week*: "This issue of handing over Palestinians to foreign authorities is a delicate issue." When asked again if Palestinian police would arrest Hamas terrorists, he said there will be no need for such action because the "population will be against that [terrorist] and that group." In addition, Khalil Foutah of the PLO told this writer that "there will be resistance until the occupation is ended," adding that the statement includes Israel's presence in East Jerusalem. The implication, of course, is that the PLO can be expected to be soft on terrorism as long as Israel maintains a presence in East Jerusalem, even after autonomy is implemented.

The fact that the PLO and Hamas remain rivals on the political level, and that the PLO may be trying to politically destroy Hamas, could come as little solace to Israelis if Hamas terror continues undisturbed. The

recent diplomatic gestures between the PLO police and Al Zahhar hardly reassure Israelis of the Palestinian police's intentions to control Hamas terrorists. Also, an attempt to confront a Hamas terrorist might constitute a violation of the PLO-Hamas truce if that terrorist has taken no action against fellow Palestinians.

More important, the PLO's continuing campaign to create the appearance of a real peace with Hamas and its refusal to publicly condemn Hamas is evidence of Hamas's political hold on the Palestinian people. So far, the PLO has aggressively tried to play up its ties with Hamas, despite the opposing stance of the latter. That campaign could be seriously harmed if PLO police confront Hamas activists, and such an outcome appears less likely given the diplomatic ties being forged between the police and Hamas.

In short, the PLO and Hamas appear to be in a

political stalemate, if not an outright political war with each other, but on a military level they have made peace. Any confrontation with Hamas would harm the PLO's political and military hold, no matter what its ultimate stance on the fundamentalists. In other words, Hamas terrorism is likely to continue unhindered by the Palestinian Autonomy.

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Jeff Helmreich is staff writer for the *Long Island Jewish World* and the *Manhattan Jewish Sentinel*. This *Jerusalem Letter* is an updated expansion of an article, written together with Sam Skolnik of the *Washington Jewish Week*, on PLO-Hamas cooperation since the September 13th signing of the Declaration of Principles, that appeared in the *Long Island Jewish World*.