

# SURVEY OF ARAB AFFAIRS

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## A SPECIAL REPORT:

### ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AMONG THE PALESTINIAN ARABS

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#### **The Beginnings of Islamic Fundamentalism in Palestine**

The contemporary rise of Islamic fundamentalism among Palestinian Arabs is not without antecedents. In the 1920s, Izz a-Din al-Qassam, a Syrian Muslim who settled in Haifa, became the Imam of the Istiqlal Mosque there, and undertook extensive religious, political and educational activities in Northern Palestine. In the early 1930s, he formed a militant group, the Black Hand (al-kaff al-Aswad), as an instrument of struggle against British imperialism and Jewish Zionism. In 1935 he called openly for holy war (jihad) against both, but he and his followers were intercepted by the British authorities and crushed. Qassam himself died in the battle which ensued.(1)

The next wave of fundamentalism among Palestinian Muslims was prompted by the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt in the late 1920s. During the Palestinian revolt of 1936-39, Abd-al-Rahman al-Banna, brother of Hassan al-Banna, the founder and first leader of the Brotherhood, visited Jerusalem, met with the Mufti, and helped channel Brotherhood funds and

propaganda to aid in the revolt. From these modest beginnings there developed after World War II a formidable network of the Brotherhood's presence in Palestine. The first Muslim Brotherhood groups in Palestine were established in 1946 in Jaffa, Lydda, Haifa, Nablus and Tulkarem.(2) In all, 25 branches of the Brotherhood were established in western Palestine, with an active membership of close to 20,000.(3)

The activism of the Brotherhood was aimed against both British occupation and Zionist aspirations. To this end, the Brotherhood engaged in paramilitary training, but apparently due to their sporadic nature and the surveillance of the British authorities, these efforts did not bear much fruit. Local members of the Brotherhood did participate in the war against fledgling Israel in 1948, along with larger contingents dispatched from Egypt and, to some extent, from Syria and Transjordan as well.(4)

The 1948 war between the Arabs and Israel, and the consequent armistice agreements between the parties signed in 1949, split the Palestinian Arab population into an Israeli-ruled minority

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and a Jordanian and Egyptian-governed majority, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip respectively. Under Israel, the Arab community found itself exhausted, disoriented, impoverished and humiliated, and the Muslim Brotherhood fell into disarray. One insignificant exception was the tiny Muhammed's Youth (Shabab Muhammed) organization which began in the Galilee in the mid-1960s. The Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, however, emboldened by the active participation of the Brotherhood in 1948, and shocked by the disaster (nakbah) of the loss of parts of Palestine to the Jews, swelled the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood in those territories after 1949.

In the West Bank there was widespread distribution of the literature of the movement, as well as social and cultural activities, especially among the youth, such as scouting and sports organizations. Moreover, while all other political parties were banned most of the time by the Hashemite rulers, the Brotherhood was permitted to maintain a network of branches and to conduct its affairs openly. This did not mean that the Brotherhood was reticent to criticize the society amidst which they operated; they indeed occasionally criticized Jordan's close links to the West, the public consumption of alcohol, and the loose interpretations of Muslim law (shari'a).<sup>(5)</sup> The dual position of the Brotherhood as an accepted legal organization, on the one hand, and as a critic of society, on the other, produced an ambivalent stance in the organization towards Jordanian rule. At times, when criticism and friction with the authorities became too evident, the regime tightened control over the Brotherhood and even arrested some of its leaders; at other times, they won the favor of the king due to their consistent anti-nationalist, anti-Communist, anti-Baathist, and anti-Nasserite stands which served the interests of the Hashemite rulers.

The Muslim Brotherhood was not alone in the West Bank in waving the flag of

fundamentalist Islam. Another faction, the Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb a-Tahrir al-Islami), propagated similar views and attracted similar constituencies. Rivalry between the two movements ensued, which may have damaged their common cause, especially at a period when pan-Arabism, at its height under Nasser, was far more attractive to the masses than Islamic ideologies. In any case, the Muslim fundamentalist appeal, although well organized around a committed hard-core of fundamentalist Muslims, remained marginal in Jordanian politics, as in the rest of the Arab world, until the waning of Nasserism and the Arab defeat of 1967. These Muslim elements did not manifest themselves in the struggle against Israel and did not participate in violence across its borders.<sup>(6)</sup>

In the Gaza Strip, on the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood was far more active and militant, both domestically and externally with regard to Israel. In the pre-revolution years (1949-52), the Brotherhood was banned in the Strip, as they were in Egypt proper, and their activities were conducted underground. During the first two years of the Egyptian Revolution (1952-54), when the Brotherhood seemed to close ranks with the authorities, its membership increased as did its level of activity. They soon went underground again when their attempt on Nasser's life was revealed in Cairo and the movement was banned throughout Egypt. But by then the Brotherhood had become the largest political movement in the Strip. The Brotherhood advocated armed resistance against Israel during the brief Israeli occupation of the Strip in 1956-57. Members of these armed fedayeen groups, which had been organizing since 1954, later joined the Fatah and became leaders of the PLO.<sup>(7)</sup> The lull in hostilities between Israel and Egypt in the period of 1956-67 also signalled a significant weakening of the Brotherhood in the Strip, while Arab nationalist groups were in ascendance there.

### **Israeli Occupation Reunites the Fragmented Palestinians**

The occupation by Israel of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip during the 1967 war introduced a number of new factors into the Islamic movement in western Palestine. The sudden removal of boundaries between Israel proper and its newly-occupied territories created a new self-awareness among the Arabs of those two territories as well as the Arabs of Israel, an awareness which helped cement close and growing links among three heretofore divided components of the Palestinian people. In addition, the struggle of the Muslim fundamentalists now became focused on the Israeli enemy and on resistance to the occupation, a much more concrete and unifying theme for the Muslims than the previous struggle against the Arab Muslim governments which had ruled them. Paradoxically, the Muslim movements thrived under Israeli rule, which permitted their open activities as long as they did not contravene the law, much more than they had under the Arab governments which had ruled the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel was viewed by Muslim fundamentalists as an extension of the West, and by its very presence and predomination threatened to encroach upon the traditional value systems of the Arabs in the occupied territories. Only a vigorous response-by-negation by the fundamentalists could ward off what they regarded as an ideological onslaught of Israel designed to subvert Islam from within.

In addition, Israel's incursion into all fabrics of social, political, and economic life in the territories dealt a deadly blow to the vestiges of the rule of the notables (a'yan) who had dominated Palestinian politics after World War I.(8) Those notables, who struggled under the British Mandate to maintain their status as guardians of the holy places in Palestine and to prevent the establishment of a Jewish national home there, had continually raised the symbols of Jerusalem and the Holy Land to counter those perceived threats. With the notables gone as predominant figures in Palestinian

politics, and in view of the avowedly secular leadership offered by the PLO, Palestinians concerned about political Islam turned to fundamentalist movements.

Up until the end of the 1970s, Islamic fundamentalist activity in the territories was largely dormant,(9) probably due to the Brotherhood's reluctance to challenge the Palestinian nationalist movement under the aegis of the PLO, which was at the height of its popularity in those years. However, the success of the Iranian Revolution (1979), followed by the assassination of President Sadat (1981), who had been repudiated as a traitor to Islam, and the mounting Islamic resistance against Israel in the wake of the Lebanese War (1982-83), all lent impetus to Islam as a political force pregnant with change and victory. The Islamic movement in the West Bank and Gaza identified strongly with these events, which helped to build it into an alternative force to the failing conventional Palestinian nationalism.

In the 1980s the Islamic bloc emerged as a powerful constituency in West Bank and Gaza politics, boosted by the establishment in 1978 of three Islamic colleges in Jerusalem, Gaza, and Hebron. The Muslim Brotherhood remains the largest and most influential faction, seconded by the smaller Liberation party. These elements are particularly visible in the universities of the territories, but their adherents are spread throughout the area. They consist of large groups of quietists who see Israeli occupation as a punishment for the deviation of Muslims from the Path of Allah, and therefore they seek the solution for the plight of the Palestinians in the return to the way of God. There are also small but growing bands of hard-core militants who have embraced the Iranian model of revolution, where a committed, activist group had succeeded in toppling a strong but unpopular government backed by the U.S.(10)

The Brotherhood has embraced a wide-ranging political, cultural, and social program which, in the absence of a Palestinian national authority in the territories,

purports to outline patterns of conduct to counter the occupying power, and to gradually create an anti-state which would ultimately replace the withdrawing government of the Israelis. As of the late 1980s, this movement is represented by " Hamas," which stands for Harakat Mugawama Islamiyya (the Movement of Islamic Resistance), an acronym also signifying "devotion," "enthusiasm," and "zeal" in the path of Allah. Judging from its active participation in the intifada, its series of public announcements which are calculated to compete with the PLO, and its political platform released in 1988, this fundamentalist movement seems to articulate a growing sentiment among the Palestinians that Islam is the panacea for all the ills of Palestine.

#### The Hamas Charter

The Hamas movement's program, as spelled out in its charter, emphasizes the world view outlined below:

a) The Hamas is committed to a holy war for Palestine against the Jews, until the victory of Allah is implemented.

b) The land must be cleansed from the impurity and viciousness of the tyrannical occupiers.

c) Under the wings of Islam, coexistence is possible with members of other faiths. When Islam does not prevail, then bigotry, hatred, controversy, corruption and oppression prevail.

d) The Muslims are under obligation, by order of their Prophet, to fight Jews and kill them wherever they can find them.

e) The Hamas strives to establish an entity where Allah is the ultimate goal, the Quran its constitution,  Jihad  its means, and death for the cause of Allah its sublimest aspiration.

f) The land of Palestine is a holy Islamic endowment ( waqf ) until the end of days. Thus, no one can negotiate it away.

g) It is the personal religious duty of each individual Muslim to carry out this  Jihad  in order to bring redemption to the land.

h) The Hamas is opposed to all international conferences and negotiations and to any peaceful settlements, for sovereignty over the land is a religious act and negotiating over it means yielding some of it to the rule of the unbelievers.

i) The Jews have taken over the world media and financial centers. By fomenting revolutions, wars, and such movements as the Freemasons, communism, capitalism, Zionism, Rotary, Lions, B'nai B'rith, etc., they are subverting human society as a whole in order to bring about its destruction, propagate their own viciousness and corruption, and take over the world via such of their pet institutions as the League of Nations, the UN, and the Security Council. Their schemes are detailed in the  Protocols of the Elders of Zion .

j) The Hamas opposes the PLO secular state in Palestine because it would be anti-Islamic in essence. But if the PLO adopts Islam as its path, then all members of the movement will become the soldiers of liberation and will "produce the fire that will smite the enemy."

The 36-article Hamas Charter has some interesting parallels with the 1968 PLO Charter in terms of the comprehensiveness, totality and virulence of their negation of Israel, but it nevertheless has some very distinct characteristics:

1) While the PLO document was deliberated, debated, argued, amended, and voted upon before it was adopted by the Palestine National Council, the Hamas document was apparently concocted by some of its leaders and then announced to the public.

2) Although both documents are called "Charter" ( mithaq ), it is evident that the PLO's is considered as a man-made constitutional-political document which provides for the instrument of its amendment (Article 33). The Hamas document, by contrast, creates the impression of reflecting universal, eternal, and Allah-given truths that are not liable to alternations, debates, or questions. This means that while the former is amendable, when the

political will exists, the latter is inalterable and immutable once it was put down on paper and publicized.

3) The PLO Charter avoids direct anti-Semitic attacks on Jews as such and purports to struggle against Zionism only, while the Hamas document repeats accusations directly taken from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and other notorious anti-Semitic writings.

4) While the PLO Charter uses political language, intertwined with Arab-Islamic rhetoric, the Hamas Charter is wholly based on, and consistently draws from, the language of Islam.(11) Not only Islamic symbols are invoked, but all the political ramifications of the platform derive from Islam and are couched in Islamic terms. Often, the document's articles are backed by Quranic verses, which lend to it its immutable quality.

5) The Hamas regards the entire Islamic world as its constituency and seeks support therein. Its message is pan-Islamic and extra-national; the PLO relies more on Arab nationalism and views the Arab states as its backers and partners.

6) The PLO plan is not only substantive but also organizational and institutional; it sets forth the steps to be followed with a view of annihilating Zionism and of substituting for it a new Palestinian political entity. Hamas' vision is one of an Islamic state over the entire land of Palestine, as part of the revived Islamic Umma, but it does not envisage the substantive and institutional means through which this would be achieved.

7) The PLO program purported to resolve the status of Jews in the land of Palestine by reducing their numbers and granting political rights to the remaining minority. The Hamas explicitly states that the non-Muslims of the revealed religions would be treated according to the Islamic traditions, i.e., they would have to submit to dhimmi status.

8) While the PLO regards itself as an independent local patriotic group (watan-iyya), in the framework of ethno-cultural Arab nationalism (qawmiyya), the Hamas

declares its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt from whose ideology they draw their message and on whose masters they rely for guidance.

9) At a time when the PLO has been, at least on the surface, attempting to adopt diplomatic means and political measures in its endeavor to gain international recognition, the Hamas seems to be oblivious to the world community. For the Islamic movement, any international wheeling and dealing amounts to a "loss of time" and any intercession of the foreign powers in the Arab-Israeli conflict is tantamount to imperialism's "collusion" with Zionism.

10) The PLO Charter is totally committed to a political and military program in order to attain Palestinian self-determination and nationhood from the powers-that-be, while the Hamas platform commits itself to a socio-cultural and religious-moral mode of action in order to raise Islamic consciousness and to conquer Muslim societies from within before it conquers the rest.

### **The Hamas Message**

Hamas' role in the Intifada is on the rise, so much so that it not only challenges the monopoly of the PLO for the leadership of the unrest, but it has been shaping its own modes of rebellion against Israel. It has been issuing its own announcements calling for strikes and other measures, it has its own network of leaders and activists, and it seems to be having a deeper impact on public opinion as the political impasse leads nowhere and as the PLO leadership does not deliver anything beyond rhetoric. The mass arrests in May 1989 of the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip, including its charismatic head, Sheikh Yasin, does not seem to have significantly blunted the appeal of the movement.

Announcement No. 29 of the movement, distributed in the West Bank on September 5, 1988, provides one of the most illustrative examples of the Hamas message. On the occasion of the beginning of the tenth

month of the intifada, the announcement issued the following orders to the people of the West Bank:

a) Pursue the struggle against our enemies, the "Nazi Jews" -- (Jews, not Israelis or Zionists, despite the contention of the movement, and of other Arabs and Muslims that they entertain no hard feelings towards the Jews as such and that their grievances are directed against the Zionists and the Israelis) -- who have adopted all possible means against the Palestinians, such as: killing, exile, breaking bones, aggression against holy places and mosques, arrests, hostile acts against properties, robbery of funds, publication of false and forged tracts, and drawing slogans on walls in order to pit one party against another.

b) The "Nazi Jews" have uprooted the Palestinian people and usurped its rights. They stand behind all massacres and disasters which have befallen the Palestinian people. Sometimes they act directly against the Palestinians, at other times via their agents. Not long ago, the Palestinian people suffered the tragedy of Sabra and Shatilla on September 17, 1982. What happened to our families there is still a fresh memory. (During the Lebanese War, Christian Phalangists entered those two refugee camps near Beirut and slaughtered many Palestinian civilians. Since then, the Arabs have accused Israel of the responsibility for those massacres.)

c) On the anniversary of the arson of the Aqsa Mosque, the Hamas is calling upon its members to join in a general strike. Despite the efforts of the Jews to break the general strike, the Palestinian people, who entertain their anger against the Jews, will not submit. (In August 1969, a lunatic Australian tourist, Michael Rohan, attempted to burn the Aqsa Mosque. Despite his indictment and trial, and the efforts made by the Israeli authorities to extinguish the fire, Israel was accused by the entire Islamic world of that arson. Since then, that date has been commemorated annually, and the accusations are repeated each time about Israel's scheming in that tragedy.)

d) The Hamas does not act against the people, its reputation or its property. It is only set against the Jews and their aides. Those who spread false rumors against the Hamas are imposters (dajjal) and liars. (Dajjal is not simply an imposter but the anti-Christ in Islamic eschatological nomenclature. The Jews are implicitly accused of filling this role.)

e) Therefore, the Hamas announces a general strike to commemorate the following three dates:

1) September 9, the beginning of the tenth month of the intifada.

2) September 18, the massacres of Sabra and Shatilla.

3) September 26, the conquest of Khaybar. (Khaybar is an oasis in northern Najd, where a Jewish settlement had existed for many centuries before the Prophet mounted an expedition against them in AD 628-29 and occupied their bastions. After that, the Prophet made an agreement with them whereby they were allowed to stay on part of their lands as serfs in return for half their annual crops. According to Arabic sources, the second caliph, Umar [634-644], expelled the Jews from Khaybar altogether. Since then, Khaybar has become a symbol of Jewish submission to Islamic rule as long as they accepted it or of their expulsion if they did not. Many of the Hamas announcements during the intifada have indeed ended with the slogan: "The time of Khaybar has come!" [Hanat Khaybar].)

"This is a day of resistance when we will hit the Jews whenever and wherever possible in order to achieve our liberty, rid ourselves of occupation, and retrieve our rights." (Note the three-stage program: first to achieve freedom to say and do what they wish; second, to regain the territories under Israeli rule; and third, to "retrieve their rights," a code phrase for recovering all of Palestine.)

The importance of Hamas lies not only in its rather strident and uncompromising message, but even more so in its rising profile and popularity among the Palestinians in the territories administered by Israel, even in Israel proper, where the

Islamic movement, an avowed cousin of the Hamas, has made impressive strides during the decade of the 1980s, culminating in the successes of the movement's leaders in the Israeli municipal elections of 1989. It stands to reason that the less the PLO is viewed as effective in attaining its political goals, the more the Islamic movement, including Hamas, will find itself strengthened. Already some 40 percent of the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip are said to follow the movement, and a somewhat lower percentage of sympathizers is estimated for the West Bank.<sup>(12)</sup> In any case, during the intifada the Hamas has been able on several occasions to challenge the monopoly of the PLO and especially of its dominant Fatah group.

Another prospect for the growth of the Hamas may derive from the dynamics of the intifada, on the one hand, and the facade of moderation of the PLO, on the other. For as the sacrifices and the losses of the Palestinians in the territories yield no results, many of them will turn in despair to the old and familiar teachings of Islam as a source of sustenance and comfort. The PLO, which is perceived as diluting its message and losing its zeal, all in vain, may be sidestepped by the totalitarian and absolutistic appeal of the Hamas. Loud, clear, and sharp messages have always attracted the disaffected more than hesitant, blurred, and soft half-measures.

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## Notes

1. See S. Lachman, "Arab Rebellion and Terrorism in Palestine 1929-1939," in Zionism and Arabism in Palestine and Israel, edited by E. Kedourie and S. Haim (London: Frank Cass, 1982), pp. 52-99. See also Nels Johnson, Islam and the Politics of Meaning in Palestinian Nationalism (London: Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 38-44.
2. A. Cohen, Political Parties in the West Bank Under the Jordanian Regime 1949-1967 (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 144.
3. T. Mayer, "The Military Force of Islam: The Society of the Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question, 1945-48," in Kedourie and Haim, op. cit., p. 101.
4. M. Shadid, "The Muslim Brotherhood Movement in the West Bank and Gaza," Third World Quarterly, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1988), p. 659.
5. Ibid., p. 661. See also Cohen, op. cit., pp. 148-151.
6. Shadid, p. 660.
7. Ibid.
8. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 8-15.
9. See Y. Litani, Ha'aretz (18 January 1982); and P. Johnson and J. Tucker, "Political Islam and the West Bank," MERIP Reports (February 1982), pp. 15-17.
10. Shadid, op. cit. See also A. Lesch and M. Tessler, "The West Bank and Gaza: Political and Ideological Response to Occupation," The Muslim World, Vol. 77, No. 3-4 (July-Oct. 1987), pp. 229-249.
11. For the usages of the political language of Islam, see B. Lewis, The Political Language of Islam (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988).
12. These estimates are based on interviews conducted by Israeli and other journalists in the territories. No conclusive data exist in this regard.

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