

لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله

HAMAS

*from Resistance
to Government ?*

PAOLA CARIDI



Hamas

From Resistance to Government?

by
Paola Caridi

Translated by
Andrea Teti

Copyright © Feltrinelli, 2009, 2010

English translation copyright © PASSIA, 2010

BACK COVER

What lies behind the mystery of Hamas? This book provides a first-hand investigation into the movement, with original interviews and a fresh look at the reasons behind the consensus Hamas receives from across the Palestinian political spectrum.

Established in 1987 as a resistance organization against the Israeli occupation, Hamas has used terrorism and suicide attacks, it has challenged Yasser Arafat's authority, it has survived the death of many of its leaders. In 2006 it was democratically elected by the majority of the Palestinian people to become part of the PNA government. What lies behind the mystery of Hamas? Why has an Islamist movement gained so much recognition among a basically secular people such as the Palestinians? And why has it not melted away like snow in the sun when the entire West isolated it from the rest of the world? Events have shown that Palestinian political Islam cannot be considered a passing phenomenon, nor is it the product of a single cause: be it the birth of Israel, the occupation of Palestinian land, or the lack of a true Palestinian state. Asking these questions also means providing answers to what has been documented by the news in recent years: the internal division of Palestinians, the desperation of life in Gaza, the lack of a realistic prospect for peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the near future. Paola Caridi's book tells the story of Hamas using a combination of news and archival sources, describing settings, and giving voice to its protagonists. And, for the first time, it tries to reveal some of the unknown characteristics of an organization that in some ways is still clandestine or that has, over the last few years, gone back to being partially secret. There are well-known issues such as terrorism. But there is also the much less well-known aspect of welfare, set up well before the rise of a Hamas presence from within the social and religious framework of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. There is the political organization, structured like mass-based European parties. And then there are the militants, the leaders, the silent supporters and those many Palestinians who voted for Hamas without sharing its ideology. Putting together all these pieces reveals a far more complex picture than the one described by the media so far.

***“A veritable reportage-book written with a great keenness of analysis”
Dominique Vidal – “Le Monde Diplomatique”***

PAOLA CARIDI (Rome, 1961) is a founding member of the Italian News Agency *Lettera22* and is currently working for national and local Italian newspapers. She gained a PhD in the History of International Relations from the University of Florence, specializing in the Middle East and North Africa. She worked as a correspondent from Cairo (2001-2003) and has been based in Jerusalem since then. In 2007 she published *Arabi Invisibili* ('Invisible Arabs') with Italy's Feltrinelli publishing house, winning the prestigious Capalbio Prize in 2008. In 2009, she published *Hamas*, also with Feltrinelli.

*To the memory of my teacher,
Paolo Spriano,
historian and journalist*

Index

Acknowledgements

Translator's note

[Maps]

Emotional Prologue

The Number 19 Bus
Faiqa's pilgrimage

Chapter 1. Between Welfare and Resistance

Welcome to Hamastan
From Nakba to politics
The Universities of the Revolt
It all started in Gaza. A coincidence?

Chapter 2. Snapshots from Hamas' world

The orphans of Al-Salah
Of music, films and stereotypes
Hijab and politics

Chapter 3. Consolidation

The Charter is not the Qur'an
Outsiders...
...And Insiders

Chapter 4. From the Brigand-Shaykh to the Human Bomb

A preacher in the workers' mosque
Tracing Baruch's footsteps
The Lost Generation
Hudna, Tahdi'ah, Truces

Chapter 5. The March Watershed

Orphaned
The March Watershed
A Silent Presence

Chapter 6. Abul Abed's Double-Breasted Suit

The Day that Shook the PNA
Hamas vs. Fatah
Swords into Governments

Chapter 7. Hamas vs. Fatah

Prison Diplomacy
The Three-Month Adventure
The 'Second Liberation'
Governing the Strip

Epilogue

Swords into Governments
The Road Ahead
Addendum to the English translation

List of Acronyms

Glossary of terms in foreign languages

Endnotes

Acknowledgements

A book on Hamas handles necessarily sensitive issues, and demands a field research somehow unique. This is the reason why I will not thank individuals, with names and personal details. Rather, I will thank groups. Groups composed of course of individuals who, in different ways and in various periods during my permanence in Middle East and North Africa, provided me with keys of interpretation, testimonies, evidences, *insana corporis*, insights, reserved or public information, opinions, pathos.

There is one exception to this, namely Raf Scelsi in his ‘institutional’ role as editor at the Italian publishing house Feltrinelli as well as in his capacity as an intellectual and a friend: his was the initial idea for this book, encouraging me to bring together my job as a journalist and my training as a historian of political parties trained. I am grateful to Raf, to his intuition and to his gentle tenacity.

It was Paolo Spriano (1925-1988) who taught me most of what I know, as a Professor of Political Parties in the Rome University’s Faculty of Literature, as the author of most authoritative *History of the Italian Communist Party*, as a renowned journalist, and not least as a member of the Italian (armed) Resistance against Nazi-Fascism during WWII.

There are then very specific ‘groups’ in which each of those to whom I am indebted will recognize themselves: friends, journalists, experts, the *Pickwick Club*, people on the street. Of these, I will name neither the gender, nor the nationality, much less their religious faith. There are men and women, Israelis and Palestinians, Italians, Europeans and Americans, Arabs, Christians, Jews and Muslims. Despite the fact that this book analyzes a very specific part of Arab political Islam, I do not wish to label anyone because – first and last – there are individuals, naturally along with all their baggage of personal and community identities. To all go my heartfelt thanks, with different nuances which all know.

This English edition would have not seen the light had it not been for the decision of Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman of PASSIA, to invest in this book, during one of the many delicate, difficult and demoralizing periods of recent Palestinian history. My deep thanks to him are not only for his support, but mainly for his intellectual work and for his role as a facilitator between the different Palestinian political cultures. A special thanks to Andrea Teti, Lecturer at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Aberdeen, who decided with enthusiasm to jump in the adventure of translating this book. Between Jerusalem and Aberdeen, Naples and Sydney.

The last (but not the least) “thank you”, that one which is worth forever, before, beyond, after this book, goes to my precious family. Especially for the deep patience that each of its members had during the long time I worked on this research, on the book, on life and politics in Palestine. With passion.

PC
Jerusalem,
January 2010

Translator's note

The original text was translated with the privilege of close and fruitful collaboration with the Author, to whom my thanks must go first and foremost. I am grateful to Paola Caridi for affording me the responsibility and the privilege of the translation of a book which is certainly timely, informative, and insightful. Accessible to readers of all backgrounds, this book is thoroughly useful to both specialist and non-specialist audiences. I am also grateful to Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi and to PASSIA for the generous support in aid of this undertaking.

In co-ordination with the Author, the original Italian text has been modified in places, changing certain expressions, sentence constructions and some of the original Italian references for an English-speaking audience. A glossary of terms in languages other than English and a glossary of acronyms have been provided.

Terms in Arabic have been rendered either, for those best-known in English, according to the spelling most in use, or in the case of all others according to a transliteration which avoids specialist conventions, retaining only an ' indicating the *'ayn*. Names of authors are given as spelled in the publications referred to. All terminology relating to the land occupied by Israel during the 1967 war has been modeled on OCHA conventions.

All the translation's limitations and faults remain entirely my own.

AT
Aberdeen, UK
January 2010

Andrea Teti is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Aberdeen and Senior Fellow at the European Centre for International Affairs. His research focuses on Middle Eastern politics, political theory, and the history of Social Science.

[insert here:

Maps:

1. UNGA Partition Plan and 1949 Armistice
 2. Gaza (updated)
 3. West Bank (Ocha)
 4. 2-State-Solution
-]

Emotional Prologue

The Number 19 Bus

“Good luck!”, a dear friend said to me, with both affection and concern, when I told him what I was about to do: write a book about Hamas. His words gave me the key for my labors: what else could be said about the most important Palestinian Islamist movement? In Israel there are those who call Hamas militants ‘animals’, or even ‘cannibals’. During Bill Clinton’s presidency, the United States placed the movement on its list of terrorist organizations. A few years later, Europe followed the American example. In this context, what can one possibly write? What *should* one write? Should I provide a detailed description of how a suicide belt is built? Should I provide a voice for Hamas’ armed men, the (young) men of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, portrayed in that iconography standardized the world over of the balaclava and the green bandanna? Or perhaps I should enter an Israeli prison and interview those who organized the terrorist attacks, or the would-be suicide bombers who changed their minds and didn’t blow themselves up.

No, there is no need for such volumes. The shelves of bookstores and those of many homes are replete of sensational titles, of front covers with hyper-veiled Muslim women, of would-be suicide bombers cocooned in camouflage, of Arab children holding up guns, and so on. Few books, however, provide complex answers to the crucial question that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Palestinian elections of January 25th, 2006.

In those elections, Palestinians exercised their right and duty to vote with a deep and unanimously recognized sense of democracy. And they gave Hamas a decisive mandate. Why, at that particular point in time, did Hamas attract the support of the majority of Palestinians? Had the Palestinians, whose story we had all come to know over the past forty years, suddenly become supporters of terrorism? This over-simplistic, Manichean explanation was offered by those who supported the chimera of a ‘guided democratization’ in the Middle East, modeled on Western democracies. Such people, faced with the electoral result, would ask: How is it possible? How can it be that when we grace them with the opportunity to use the vote – that prince among instruments of Western representative democracies – that they, one man with one vote, end up choosing Hamas? These were the questions one heard in the immediate aftermath of the election. The answers came: Perhaps – these voices asked – rather than protest at the scandal of Palestinians’ choice, we should reconsider our strategy. The truth is that, given the electoral results, given that vote, the Hamas victory has to be erased. At all costs.

This is precisely what happened. In practice, Hamas’ electoral success in 2006 was annulled by the international community, erased as though those very same heads of government had not earlier praised the presence of the Islamist party on the electoral roll. As though the polling booths had never been installed throughout the West Bank and Gaza. As though just under 900 international observers had never been installed and had never attested to the democratic character of the electoral process. ‘Free and fair’, it was

said at the time, an example of freedom and propriety, as all the reports compiled in the election's aftermath said. Yet, ever since the establishment of the Hamas government the following March, the international community bolted all exits and enclosed Palestinian politics in a pen.

Doors locked, windows barred, and still no answer to the fundamental question: Why did Hamas win on January 25th, 2006? And this is itself a question which is only the latest in a long series of political questions, the tip of an iceberg of questions which are all the more urgent because they go to the heart of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Indeed, for precisely this reason, they require complex and exhaustive answers. The first answer, the hardest, the most controversial, but also the most clearly backed by both facts and experts, is that Hamas is not a terrorist organization, but rather a political movement which has used terrorism, particularly during a certain phase of its history spanning over two decades. The latest to attest to this is a man who cannot be accused of either collusion or sympathy towards the members of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*: Tom Segev, a well-known editorialist for *Ha'aretz* – one of Israel's most popular broadsheets, particularly abroad – wrote the day after the beginning of Operation Cast Lead, begun by the Israeli Defense Forces on December 27th, 2008: “‘Hamas is not a terrorist organization holding Gaza residents hostage: It is a religious nationalist movement, and a majority of Gaza residents believe in its path.’”¹ This is a distinction which appears to take into account neither the fear of Sderot's inhabitants, nor of the suffering of the families of the over five hundred victims of the suicide bombings which not only Hamas but all Palestinian armed factions – including those linked to Fatah – carried out inside Israel between 2000 and 2005, the year of Hamas' declaration of a *de facto* truce. Men, women and children: the civilians dead in the buses, in the cafés, on the roads of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Afula, Netanya, Haifa. Israelis, Jews and Arabs, foreigners, soldiers on leave, mothers, students on the way to school early in the morning.²

Early, like that morning of January 29th, 2004, when Ali Munit Youssef Jihara, a Palestinian policeman from Bethlehem, blew himself up in one of Jerusalem's downtown quarters, in a road with an evocative name, Rechov Azza – Gaza Road – fifty meters from the office of the then Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, and fifty meters away from the Moment Café, which had been the target of another suicide attack two years before. At that time, I lived less than 200 meters away from Rechov Azza. I didn't hear the explosion, as is often the case in these circumstances. I heard about it only later. What I did hear were the ambulances' strident horns, the crazed claxons and the loudspeakers of police cars. They were telling me that there had been an attack. I made sure that the rest of the family were ok – my husband had also left to take our son to the nursery – and then I rushed to Gaza Road, to see with my own eyes what a suicide attack meant: a bus half of which had been blown away, so that the crumpled chassis is the only simulacrum

¹ Tom Segev, “Trying to ‘teach Hamas a lesson’ is fundamentally wrong”, *Ha'aretz*, 29 December 2008.

² The Israeli Ministry for Foreign Affairs reports statistics updated to June 2008 which indicate 542 victims of suicide attacks carried out between 2000 and 2007 (<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Victims+of+Palestinian+Violence+and+Terrorism+sinc.htm>). Suicide attacks, however, began at least six years earlier, in 1994: according to the numbers reported by the same Ministry, between 1994 and 1999 250 Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks, a broad definition which also includes suicide attacks carried out inside Israel, the borders of which are defined as the armistice lines of 1949 – in other words, the borders of the ‘Green Line’.

yet visible, the symbol of all the broken lives, the tattered flesh which, I was told, could be found blown onto the balconies of the buildings in the Rehavia quarter, a middle class area which provided for the quiet retirement of professionals and intellectuals. Like Zeruya Shalev, writer, author of familiar novels, whom I met four years after that January 29th, at that very Moment Café which had in the meantime changed its name to Resto-Bar. Life is made of human beings and of stories which touch us, and it wasn't until four years later that I discovered that she had been on that road, just before I arrived to describe the aftermath of the attack, among the dozens of injured in that attack, which had also claimed eleven lives. She had been hit in the knee as she was on the sidewalk, with the bus driving past her just before it exploded.

That attack was not claimed by Hamas, but they not only did not condemn it, they commended it. It was immediately claimed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, the armed faction close to Fatah, Arafat's former party. It was my baptism for 'that kind' of news in Jerusalem, where I had arrived just a month and a half before, in the still bloody wake of the Second Intifada. Thinking about it again, composing the pieces of that personal, professional, and human mosaic which is one's life, perhaps it was precisely that attack which gave me a point of entry into the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The lifeless shell of a bus, its rear portion blackened, yet intact around the driver's seat. And outside, along the perimeter designated by that symbol of suffering, a deep sense of unreality, of detachment between the image of the explosion and the silence of the aftermath: the 'specialists' looking for all that might be linked to the explosion, the sorry remains of human beings, the objects belonging to those who were on that Number 19 bus, the owners of the shops and the tenants who sweep broken glass off the pavement.

From then on, after that fateful January in 2004, my role in Jerusalem would become double: witness of the news by profession, and the city's resident and thus potential unwitting victim as a consequence of a choice we made as a family. It is precisely this dual role which made it impossible for me to shun the questions, that is to ask myself what it meant to live with that daily fear packed into a rucksack, into banal everyday gestures, getting onto a bus to go to work, entering a café, finding oneself in a car behind public transport and hope it isn't a suicide bomber sitting on the seat just the other side of a glass windshield, or walking a little more briskly past the bus stop on Jaffa Road or the popular market of Mahane Yehuda because crowds are always dangerous.

But these were not the only questions I asked myself, precisely because it was my duty both as professional and as a human being to dismiss neither questions nor possible answers. I have always wondered what might lead a twenty-year-old man, a teenager at eighteen, a young woman of twenty-two to give up their own life and cause the death of others. I have never thought that this might be a decision taken lightly: all one has to do is step into someone else's shoes, one's neighbor's shoes, to understand that a gesture so definitive, so totalizing, must be born of a feeling which is equally definitive and totalizing. Hate, pain, revenge: one can conjugate desperation however one wishes to, but what is sure is that a suicide bomber's heart is not light, he is not a sniper who fires from afar without putting his life on the line. A suicide bomber pays with his own life, he cannot go back, he cannot be 're-educated'.

The common view in the West makes do with the idea that it is religion which provides the crucial impulse to become a suicide bomber. Or rather, specifically, this account maintains that Islam promises so much in the afterlife that it makes death lighter.

I have never fully believed such a ‘religious’ interpretation of this kind of suicide: in my opinion, this kind of act never loses its political significance, and this political significance falls entirely within the bounds of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of national claims. Indeed, confirmation of the political dimension of such an act can come from considering a simple fact: it is not only Islamist organizations like Hamas or Islamic Jihad which have used suicide attacks, but also Fatah and the thoroughly secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Of course, the fact that these organizations are rooted in more conventional post-1948 Palestinian nationalism in no way detracts from the urgency of the questions which the use of this kind of terrorism raises. It does, however, implicitly question whether it can be right to view Hamas solely in this ‘religious’ light, and whether it might not be more intellectually serious to use more sophisticated interpretive instruments to understand this organization – those same instruments which have also been used for groups such as Fatah or the PFLP.

If these simplistic answers are unsatisfactory, then one must go beyond such simplistic interpretations. This in turn requires immersing oneself in the complexity of the Palestinian Islamist movement, an organization the existence of which is based not only on an indefinite religious substratum, but that is, to all intents and purposes, a movement for political reform which cannot divorce itself from reality, from concreteness, from pragmatism. Reality, concreteness and pragmatism which paradoxically co-exist with the military wing, with guerrilla, with suicide attacks. Without an analysis of this complexity, it is not possible to gain an understanding of what has happened in Palestine not only over the past three years, but over the past two decades.

Faiqa’s Pilgrimage

Faiqa, for example, was a member of the People’s Party, one of the two incarnations of Palestinian communism. She took part in the First Intifada, and for that she ended up in an Israeli prison. She was a strong woman, with a deep gaze, a full face and a dark complexion, and a head covered by a simple kerchief, a tiger-skin print hijab. I met her during the winter of 2008 in Kobar, a village just above Ramallah, a few kilometers from Bir Zeit University. Faiqa is not from Kobar, in fact she has no links with what is little more than a village, known for being the birthplace of all Palestine’s best-known Barghouthis. And yet, when I met her, she had recently arrived in Kobar on board a bus in order to convey her condolences to a widow she’d never met in her life, the wife of a man she had never met: a Hamas imam, one of the best-known in the area around Ramallah. Faiqa had learned of the death of shaykh Majid Barghouthi, who an investigation would find a few weeks later had died under torture. Shaykh Majid had been taken away by the men of the Mukhabarat, the Palestinian secret service, and had not left the interrogation room on his feet. The news of his death spread through Palestine: *Al-Jazeera* had been to Kobar, headlining the ugly news, and Faiqa told me she had been unable to sleep at night because of it. She woke breathless, had trouble falling asleep again, and finally decided to go to Kobar even though she had nothing to do with that family or that political history.

If a woman with a communist past, with strong and intelligent eyes, travels through Palestine to pay her respects to a Hamas imam, what then is Hamas not simply for its members, but for all of Palestinian society? Not just 'resistance', not just guerrilla. And not just a simple network of social services, prepared to supplement with their own 'welfare-within-welfare' the Palestinian National Authority's provision, a provision which fourteen years after its inception has yet to reach all the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas must represent something more, something which resonates with the expectations and prospects of the Palestinian people as a whole. It is in this dimension which one might begin to find an explanation for this movement's existence and its survival in a land which hopes one day to become a recognized state, viable, possible, real. Indeed, given that Palestinian 'political Islam' has not disappeared like snow in the sun despite the military pressure which both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have repeatedly exercised – including the assassination of Hamas' leadership – one must conclude that the Islamist movement must have provided an alternative to the secularists which was considered more than simply plausible.

These alternatives may appear unrealistic to a Western observer, including as they do the rejection of Israel which Hamas inserted into its own (in)famous Charter of 1988 calling for Israel's destruction, suicide attacks on Israeli cities, or the launch of Qassam rockets in 2007-2008 which smacked of total confrontation. But from a Palestinian standpoint, Hamas has not just provided these answers: from its political stances during the First Intifada at least up until the electoral victory of 2006, it also highlighted the fragility of Fatah and of the Palestinian National Authority, and ultimately of the PLO itself. This is particularly clear with respect to the question of peace with Israel, which was not achieved through the Oslo Accords. And indeed, far from contributing to peace, many now point at the 'Oslo process' as having lead down a dead end, legitimizing the Israeli policy of establishing 'facts on the ground' regarding settlements in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, just as it legitimized Israeli control of water resources and of the economy.

Recognition of the condition of the weakest parts of the population, political answers concerning the future for Palestine, and rigor in personal conduct: I have come to understand that these factors are at the roots of Hamas' electoral success between 2005 and 2006 as much as national claims and protest against the corruption and clientelism of the Palestinian National Authority. I understood this when I saw Hebron for myself, a city which I have come to love during the last six years of my life in Israel and Palestine. I cannot even exactly explain why Hebron – Al-Khalil to the Palestinians – in particular, not least because it is certainly not a fascinating city: it has many of the undesirable traits of the urban South of Italy, and that sense of slowness and of tradition which I know well. Hebron is (correctly) considered Hamas' stronghold in the West Bank, as it proved during the elections of January 2006, or indeed as demonstrated by the delaying tactics employed by the PNA to stall earlier local elections, out of fear of losing the most important city of the Southern West Bank, and thus control of one of the most important industrial and commercial nodes of Palestine.

I should not therefore have been surprised at the tens of thousands of people who descended from Hebron's populous hinterland, from the suburbs, the villages, the countryside, the hills, and of course the various quarters of the city on the eve of the 2006 general elections: minibuses bursting with whole families and green flags, all flocking to

Hamas' final political rally. And yet, in the bitter cold of January, that part of Palestine made of normal people, made of many women and mothers, made of people who were not on the lists of clients or patrons of the *sulta* – the term by which Palestinians refer to the National Authority – threw another question at me: which Palestine did the West portray? Which pages, how many pages were dedicated to those families, the farmers, the poor, the refugees, as well as the technicians and the professionals who wave the Hamas flag? Is it possible to paint all these people with the same simple and brutal brushstroke of willing backers of those suicide attacks? But if it is not – as it clearly is not – then who exactly are these people who have chosen Hamas, either as party of government or as expression of their own ideology?

The first, simple fact to start from is that media representations are inevitably simplistic compared to the complexity of reality, while when it comes to the Middle East it is precisely that representation which is considered the only plausible version of reality. This may be the reality, but it does not mean we are justified – in my case, as a historian and a journalist – in setting that complexity aside, in accepting unquestioningly simplifications which might serve this or that interest, but which never serve the truth. These are the reasons for my choosing to write on a subject that many consider not so much a difficult topic as much as an uncomfortable and provocative one: the first twenty years of Hamas, from its birth during the First Intifada of 1987 to the coup which, in June 2007, lead the Islamist group to taking control of the Gaza Strip, and ultimately to the tragic Israeli military intervention in this area which began on December 27th, 2008.

Chapter 1

Between Welfare and Resistance

Welcome to Hamastan

The wide slivers of plastic snap in the wind. An invisible wind whistling through a long corridor closed off by slabs of cement eight meters high. Slivers of plastic and slabs of cement at Erez are the funerary monument of the 1993 Oslo Accords and of an ideal of (one-way) economic development which seemed to emerge over the horizon. This ideal had been realized in those Israeli industrial zones which had arisen in border areas and where Palestinians arrived from Gaza in the morning, provided cheap labor, only to return to the Strip in the evening. Then, when the conflict became even harsher at the outbreak of the Second Intifada, throughout the long Erez corridor along the northern border between Gaza and Israel, queues of Palestinians – in ever-dwindling numbers – began appearing. In the unreal silence of the Erez dawn one can nearly hear the footsteps of those workers, a black plastic bag in their hand with their food from home. All lined up, like legions, hundreds, thousands, waiting to pass through the Israeli military checkpoints at the border.

Now there is no one left in this corridor. There is only silence, amplified from the other side of the wall which separates Gaza from Israel by the improbably high ceilings of the enormous terminal which lies alone as though it were on some kind of exhibition: a beautiful terminal, in an airport-like style, and completely empty. As fate would have it, the terminal was completed when the dream of an trans-border industrial zone had already been shattered by the failure of the Oslo process, by the Second Intifada, and by terrorism. All that remains of that pained humanity which crossed the border to earn its daily keep are the snapshots taken by photographers for the Agencies. The only sound left is the wind whistling through slatted plastic and the echoes of one's own footsteps. Not even the few remaining porters, often little more than boys, can break the stony silence of Erez. Silently, they help the few Palestinians who try to pass the crossing: the sick with their applications to be hospitalized beyond the border, the employees of international organizations on missions to Israel, and a few businessmen with special permits.

They are the ones who belong to the select few 'special categories', the only Palestinians who have the good fortune of being able to leave Gaza. Ever since the summer of 2005, when the Israeli pull-out from the area crystallized the frontier with Israel to the north and west, no one else has been allowed to leave the Strip. The roughly 9,000 settlers who used to live in Gaza, and who thanks to Tel Aviv's good offices had established three settlements' blocs in the Strip, are no longer there. Before falling into a coma, then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had taken the most momentous political decision since the Israeli pull-out from Southern Lebanon in 2000 by also withdrawing from Gaza, again unilaterally. Hamas' momentous electoral victory of January 25th, 2006, came a few short months after this momentous change, after Sharon had ordered the end of the Israeli presence in the Strip. And it was precisely in Gaza that Hamas had its stronghold.

Hamas' strength was one of most important the reasons for which Gaza was increasingly placed under quarantine until, in June 2007, with the move which would bring Hamas to power in the Strip, Gaza was completely sealed off from the rest of the world. But even in previous years, the number of Palestinians who managed to get hold of a work permit in Israel had been steadily decreasing to the point of disappearing entirely, while an authorization to attend university outside the Strip, whether in Egypt or in the US, in Jordan or in Europe, has always been considered a lottery, the prize of which is claimed by a few lucky ones amongst the thousands who graduate each year. A few others earn their keep working as porters at Erez, waiting for ever-fewer customers, helping them for a few shekels, waiting for the few rare guests who arrive from the other side of the Wall, special guests, journalists, NGO volunteers, diplomats, spies, all high-risk specialists, the only ones who care about the destiny of a place so distant from the daily lives of the rest of the world. From the few experts who still pass through Erez, the young porters hope that apart from some loose change, they'll get a few cigarettes – one of the most expensive goods in the Strip under the increasingly strict isolation imposed by the Israeli army and economy.

Welcome to Gaza. Welcome to Gaza before the tragedy which was that operation, Cast Lead, which Israel launched just after Christmas 2008. Bloody and violent, this military operation marked a watershed in the history of both Gaza and Hamas because despite the self-sufficient overtones of much partisan coverage, for exactly a year and a half up until that point, the Strip had become 'Hamastan', Hamas' realm, a kind of laboratory of Middle Eastern politics. The media didn't focus on a hard fact: Gaza was one of the most desperate places on the planet well before Hamas' rise to power. The negative records only half describe its predicament: the highest population density in the world, the most consistent demographic increase in the region with over five children per woman, and since the second half of 2008 the unfortunate distinction of the highest unemployment level on the planet. A smack in the face squarely delivered when the sun, the sand, and the dust break the desolation of Erez's long corridor. Off to the right the empty shells of the buildings destroyed by the Israelis for 'security reasons' appear, destroyed so that the military's control might extend a few kilometers in from the wall at Erez, up to the buildings funded by shaykh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the old ruler of the Emirates who passed away in November 2004, at virtually the same time as Yasser Arafat.

A solitary red flag used to fly here, at least until the end of 2007, above the ghostly shell of rooms and pillars, atop the steel skeletons of the destroyed buildings of the broken industrial dream that was Erez. Not the green flag of Hamas, nor the historical yellow flag of Fatah, but the adventurous banner of the PFLP, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the 'reds' of the Palestinian political arena, their banner flying ready to take on Tsahal's guns all by itself.

That red flag, born up by the wind, didn't last long. Just a few months and it disappeared. And along with it, the last building next to the wall that marks the border, completely flattened in order to allow the Israeli army a perfect visual. All that remained for quite a long time were the plastic slivers along the reinforced concrete which marked the silent rhythm of Erez. But also the plastic slivers and the concrete were removed, exactly at the first anniversary of the Cast Lead Operation. December 2009. All that remains now, immutable, is the clicking of a silent rhythm at Erez.

Godot's silence, the silence of those who wait in fear for something to come along to break the monotony of desolation: tanks entering the olive groves of Beit Hanoun, a Qassam rocket launched towards the towns of the Negev, there, just beyond the border, and the Israeli air force's missiles ready for a targeted assassination. Or an entirely different situation, like the massive attack codenamed Hot Winter which took place over the space of barely six days between February and March 2008. The incursion resulted in 130 dead and 350 wounded among Palestinians, as well as two dead Israeli soldiers who had penetrated just over the horizon of Erez under tank and air cover, into that self-same Beit Hanoun of Shaykh Zayed's buildings, and a little further down into Jabalia, once a refugee camp and now populous town.

It was said at the time that the operation was a response to the Qassam rockets and to the more sophisticated Grad which had been launched towards cities in southern Israel. And the rockets, in turn, were often launched as reprisals for a targeted assassination carried out not just in Gaza but also in the West Bank, to demonstrate that at least as far as the armed factions were concerned the two Palestinian entities were still united.

A few days' closure, with hell breaking loose next door. A few days during which that paradoxical silence and everyday routine is broken, in a way that only low-intensity conflicts can do. It is in these moments that Erez changes, if only for a few days, before re-closing that doorway into hell, where Charon's inset eyes are replaced by the tired face of a taxi driver.

Ten minutes in the car. The time required to spy on the lives of others from the window, light a cigarette, follow the profiles of crumbling buildings, and then the open workshops along the road, the carts loaded with tires and drawn along by mules. Ten minutes, and Gaza bids you its welcome, its Mediterranean air, its southern flavor. There are half-finished buildings ready to take on another floor, another apartment for sons and parents to be built quickly on the steel frames which are already there poking through the roof, alongside drying laundry. Then there are the buildings of the Authority, the *sulta*, that Palestinian National Authority which was born in Gaza in 1994, when the Israelis left the majority of the Strip overnight, and when the Palestinian exiles who arrived with Yasser Arafat took control of places – like the military governor's building, called *Majlis al-Tashri'i* by the Palestinians – which had until that moment born the mark of the occupier, first Egyptian and later Israeli.³ Finally, there are tall buildings, especially those linked to the *sulta*, the public employees, the civil servants. A city grown upon itself at a dizzying rate. Concrete and little else facing a sea both beautiful and wild. Beautiful, and polluted by waste dumped out at sea.

Unlike the unreal atmosphere surrounding Erez, Gaza is a city where everything is normal, but where normality is nothing but fiction, a screen upon which a scene of ordinary life has been projected such as one might find in Rome, Cairo or Tunis. Shops, traffic, shop windows, children coming out of school, markets with their stalls, mechanics, offices and banks. A normal city, suspended amongst the clouds. Far away, beyond that strip barely forty kilometers long and ten wide, set between Israel and the Mediterranean, is the outside world, the rest of the world which to Gaza's Palestinians sometimes seems like a myth, sometimes a distant memory, but always nostalgic. Gaza is a place where time has been suspended, a limbo of one house following another. Here,

³ Of those hours, the pages written by Amira Hass, who was then the *Ha'aretz* correspondent from Gaza, remain the best; see Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza*, Henry Holt & Co., New York 1996, pp. 13-30.

the city is indistinguishable from the countryside, the refugee camps from the seashore, a shore which becomes a window upon a Mediterranean which is no longer the gateway to other places, but simply a backdrop, sealed off from the outside world, just like everything else. Even during Operation Cast Lead, Israel's most violent military offensive against a Palestinian territory since the Six-Day War of 1967, Gaza remained sealed off: even throughout those interminable days, it remained closed, imprisoned, with no one among the community of international journalists able to enter and to independently and truthfully tell the story of what was taking place.

Gaza is an ant-hill in which people lived piled upon one another, one from which people cannot (ever) and (often) don't want to leave. Entire generations of Gaza's inhabitants have never left the Strip, nor do they know what there might be outside, save for the stories told by their grandfathers, or the stories of some of their luckier neighbors who have been to Egypt to visit part of their family thanks to an Egyptian passport, or to a special permit to travel for medical care. Grandfathers dream of the villages they escaped from certain that they would some day return, villages which are now just over the border, just out of reach. And those who are well-connected enough remember a day trip to Jerusalem ten years ago, just a few hours outside the borders of the Strip. Dashing visits coming back before sunset, before the permit issued by Israeli authorities expired.

From here, from the Strip, one can break out only in death – death brought by old age, or ever more frequently death brought while still young. Perhaps this is why along the walls, on the large roadside billboards, and on the posters stuck in shop windows the theme is ubiquitous: the martyrs, the *shaheed*, are the sole protagonists of an iconography which, like the history of Gaza over the last six decades, speaks only the language of conflict. Armed martyrs, killed in firefights with the Israelis, or by a missile fired by a Tshal helicopter which blew up their car. There have been no suicide attacks in the Israeli cities since 2005, attacks that in any case originated far more frequently from the West Bank, rather than from Gaza. There are, however, unarmed *shaheed*, men or women or children. All of them are listed under the same rubric – *shaheed* – which unites all the factions and the colors of all the flags which in a now customary symbolism accompany posters, bills, and portraits. There is no distinction. The flag might be the green of Hamas, it might be the lemon yellow of Fatah, or the red of the Popular Front. It might be black like the bandannas wrapped around the foreheads of Islamic Jihad militants. The *shaheed* are *shaheed*, they belong to everyone, and the colors of the flags are mere embellishments, the distinguishing mark of a political 'family'. Their photographs, mounted with a symbolic backdrop which combines the Al-Aqsa Mosque with the slogans of the 'resistance' and Kalashnikovs, flood the city's walls, its shop windows, front entrances to apartment blocs, and even cars. Nothing to do with the iconography of Palestinian *fedayeen*, secular nationalist guerrillas from the Seventies, portrayed as cosmopolitan, urban, educated.⁴ Today, everything is different: religious symbols have become the line which joins Palestinian factions, alongside the figurative rhetoric of resistance. This is the only iconography which runs throughout the Strip, a constant reminder that Gaza is not a peaceful place, that it is not a fishing village, that it is not just poverty. There are poverty and war, pain and deprivation, destruction and the bleak horizon of a featureless future.

⁴ Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York, 1996, p. 95.

It is in this desolate land that Hamas has taken power, after the extreme violence between Fatah and Hamas militias in June of 2007, when the attempt at cohabitation between the two main Palestinian political movements in a national unity government failed in a matter of a few, bloody days. Hamas reached power in the 2006 elections, but its power had been halved by the duopoly which immediately followed: Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority, and Prime Minister and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh administering executive power. In June 2007, the PNA's duopoly becomes geographical as much as political: Abbas controls the West Bank, Haniyeh controls Gaza. Hamas, therefore, comes to administer power alone within the Strip, and it could have been no other way. Ironically, this watershed comes a few months before the celebration of two important anniversaries: twenty years since the First Intifada, and the twenty-year anniversary of the foundation of the most important Palestinian Islamist movement. The June 2007 coup represented more than just a symbolic watershed in Hamas' history: historiographically, it also marks the end of a long phase, the demarcation of a 'before' and of an 'after' in the evolution of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* – hence the acronym HAMAS – born from the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization whose history in the region stretches back to the early 1940s, to a time during which the land was under the protectorate of His Britannic Majesty, whose domains extended to the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan from the end of the First World War until 1947.

The before and after in the history of the most important Palestinian Islamist organization in itself tells an important story: from 'Islamist resistance movement' to an organization which directly administers power, whether by its own choice or otherwise. By the methodological standards of the history of Western-style political parties, there would be nothing remarkable in such a watershed: from movement to institution, from opposition to government, from armed struggle to re-entry into mainstream politics. But in the Middle East, and particularly in Palestine, Western methodologies must always to some extent be revised, not so much because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has left its mark upon the birth and life of Hamas, but rather because the movement's life has taken place entirely within the conflict – including its history in power, which is the fruit of neither reaching a peace with the enemy (Israel), nor of the normalization of state life (that of the Palestinian National Authority). Thus, even its time in power has been lived entirely within the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and Hamas knew it could enter into the institutional machinery of the PNA only by sharing the tragic fiction of an Authority which is not a state, and of a country which has neither recognized borders nor the monopoly of the use of force.

From Nakba to politics

Our story begins over sixty years ago, when the twentieth century completely disrupts the life, rhythms, codes, and the very future of a small strip of land to the north of the Sinai, transforming what was an ancient commercial transit point between the Arabian peninsula and the Mediterranean into an ante-chamber of desperation. Over the span of a single night, the Gaza district – which included all the southern part of Mandatory Palestine, under British rule – lost most of its territory. With the first Arab-Israeli conflict

of 1948-49 it became the 'Gaza Strip'. From a territory spanning nearly 1.4 million *dunums*, to a diminutive space of three hundred and twenty-five thousand *dunums*: a sliver of land less than four-hundred square kilometers. On top of the loss of territory, came the refugees, those Palestinians who fled what are today Ashkelon and Be'er Sheva, completely transforming the social, political and economic life of this small territory, as well as its demography. These are Palestinians who have fled from their villages thinking they would return in a few days, after the military operations were over. Or Palestinians chased from their houses not only to carry out a 'border clearing'⁵ – in the words of historian Benny Morris' exemplary description – but also to reduce *de facto* the Arab population in Southern Israel in the years after 1948. This was a wound which Gazan Palestinians would remember through stories like the one of the expulsion from Majdal, a few kilometers away from today's Ashkelon. After the First Arab-Israeli war, many Palestinian inhabitants stayed in Majdal, but were concentrated in a single district, a district which the Israelis called "ghetto", from which around three thousand were later deported to Gaza in 1950.⁶ The pre-1948 eighty thousand inhabitants of the area around Gaza City along the coastline were joined by a further two hundred thousand refugees. This exponential growth in population would prove difficult to absorb, modifying the very social make-up of Gaza's ancient southern district, placing on the refugees the weight of a deep, rapid and irreversible change. At the time of the First Intifada, towards the end of the Eighties, 65 percent of the half a million people who then lived in Gaza were the either refugees, their children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren.⁷

These changes truly defined an era, while at the same time representing just one of the many summersaults which this millennia-old town has witnessed throughout its history, traversed by different armies and civilizations, from the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt to the Persians, the Romans, and the British.⁸ Throughout its history, Gaza was not always as it is today, poor, miserable, isolated and cut off from the world. Gaza was the land of the Philistines, remembered in the Torah for the story of Samson and the temple of Dagon, and it lived through Alexander the Great's raids, the Islamic conquest of 635C.E. headed by Omar, one of the Prophet Muhammad's Companions, during the first great expansion of the Caliphate which eventually made Damascus its capital. Then, the British Mandate, agreed upon by Europe's Great Powers, which after the First World War brought His Majesty's troops to the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. Pitched battles, horses' hoofs and warriors' raids all testify to ancient Gaza's political

⁵ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 2003[1988], pp.528-529. For Moshe Dayan, "it was necessary to build a port city for the Negev in Majdal". Meron Rapoport, "History Erased: the IDF and the Post-1948 Destruction of Palestinian Monuments", in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 37, n. 2, 2008, p. 82; Orna Cohen, "Transferred to Gaza of Their Own Accord" in *The Arabs of Majdal in Ashkelon and Their Evacuation to the Gaza Strip in 1950*, Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 2007, p. 27.

⁶ Eitan Bronstein, "The Nakba in Hebrew: Israeli-Jewish awareness of the Palestinian Catastrophe and internal Refugees", in Nur Masalha (ed.) *Catastrophe Remembered. Israel and the Internal Refugees: Essays in Memory of Edward W. Said (1935-2003)*, Zed Books, London 2005, p. 223.

⁷ Sara Roy, *Failing Peace. Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict*, Pluto Press, London-Ann Arbor, 2007, p. 55.

⁸ Cfr. also C. Salion (ed.), *Gaza dans l'antiquité tardive: archeologie, rhétorique et histoire, Actes du Colloque international de Poitiers (6-7 mai 2004)*, Salerno (Italy), Helios, 2005; Carol A. M. Glukker, *The City of Gaza in the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, BAR, Oxford 1987.

significance, portrayed in its borders and its palaces in a Byzantine mosaic ‘produced’ and conserved in Jordan – the famous *Map of Madaba*, crucial to understanding the area’s geographical, human and political importance. Here, where there were “forums, theatres, *stoà*, and a church”, Gaza is considered of such importance to be ranked behind Jerusalem alone.

Gaza has had its golden age: central to Mediterranean trade, important station for caravans in the commerce between the south-eastern Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, it was also a cultural hub of the late Hellenic period. Scholars remember it as the center of a literary-philosophical school which had the merit of bridging Eastern Christianity and Hellenism, systematizing rhetoric in particular thanks to names like Procopius, Coricius, and Aeneas, all active between the V and VI century after Christ. During this same period, Gaza becomes the location for the development of an Eastern monasticism whose champions were venerable old hermits Barsanufius and John, as well as their disciple Dorotheus, who preferred taking care of the sick to the life of a hermit. Gaza displayed the infrastructure of an important city: thermal baths, roads lined with columns, stadia, temples later made into churches, theatres and places of entertainment. Comedy and satire were staged there, and mimes would act there. Around the third century after Christ, Olympic-style games were held here, while chariot races would take place in Gaza’s hippodrome, famous across the contemporary Hellenic world.

While Gaza’s ancient past was often glorious – and most of all *open* – its recent past and its present can be summed up with a single word: *closure*. For the six decades after 1948 Gaza has built its contemporary identity upon the increasing geographical, political and cultural separation. It is the simple chronology of events which testifies to the abruptness with which the territory’s contacts with that self-same hinterland it had always been linked with were severed. After the first Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948 the Gaza region suffered a double trauma: the initial loss of the inland area and of the North, and the drive towards the south under what amounted to an Egyptian protectorate, until the Six-Day War, when – paradoxically, under Israeli occupation – Gaza rediscovered its links to the West Bank. After 1948, Gaza gradually changed from port city and commercial hub, to an island, a sliver of land physically separated from its past and suspended in its present, in which only refugees remain as story-tellers – not least because Egypt itself was careful to avoid integrating the Strip into its own state structures. The nearly two decades of Egyptian dominion constituted the formative period of Gaza’s current identity inasmuch as they consolidated a social code based on the traditional conservatism for which Gaza and its surroundings were already famous. Over the course of the decades, the socio-cultural edifice of Gaza’s contemporary identity has been built upon both on refugees’ unique relationship with their past – the time before 1948 – which provides both a founding myth and a framework for contemporary social mores, and on their present *as refugees*. This edifice attempts to accommodate, to re-interpret everything in the light of their practical necessities (work, maintaining the family, the house, the near future) and of their ambitions, such as returning to their home village, resisting the Israelis, seeking justice or revenge, or not accepting the miserable reality of refugee camps.

During those two decades, Gaza becomes a piece of Palestine which no longer has any connections either with pre-1948 Palestine or with the West Bank, itself under

Jordanian control. Neither did it have close links to Egypt, aside from the kind of relations which an ‘overseas territory’ might have with its capital located far away beyond the oceanic deserts of the Sinai, relations made of bureaucratic exchanges, requests for services, and elite formation. For Gaza’s young, Cairo becomes the beacon for higher education: the campuses of this Arab megalopolis, from Cairo University to Ain Shams, and – at least initially – its military academies, became the places in which Gaza’s technical cadres are formed: teachers, doctors, pharmacists, engineers and other professionals. This attraction would continue even after 1967 – the year in which Cairo’s protectorate came to an end, replaced by the Israeli occupation – when during the Seventies Cairo hosted a generation of students from Gaza’s refugee camps which would later constitute the core of Hamas.

Close connections with Egyptian politics, in truth, already existed, and it was precisely as a result of relations with Hassan al-Banna’s Muslim Brotherhood ever since 1935 that Hamas was formed. In that year, two members of the Egyptian *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* – shaykh al-Banna’s brother, Abdel al-Rahman al-Sa’ati, and Muhammad al-Hakeem – had undertaken a tour during which they had also met Hajj Amin al-Husseini, then Mufti of Jerusalem, considered one of the leaders of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. At the time, there were no organic or consolidated connections, it was rather more a matter of holding the first few meetings necessary to establish those associations which would later spread al-Banna’s teaching. The turbulence of those years, including the anti-British and anti-Zionist revolt of 1936-39 and then World War II, delayed the establishment of local branches of the *Ikhwan* proper. This took place in 1945 and 1946, and would not be located in Gaza by chance alone. There is no scholarly agreement concerning the precise timing of the birth of the first Muslim Brotherhood branch in Gaza City, although it seems likely, as Khaled Hroub argues⁹, that it was established after the end of the Second World War, and was headed by shaykh Zafer al-Shawwa, who came from one of the area’s most prominent families. The city came to have four branches, in the Rimal, Harat al-Zaytounah, and Harat al-Daraj areas, later spreading to outlying areas.

The participation of the Muslim Brotherhood to the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948 made a very significant difference, increasing the consensus for the *Ikhwan* exponentially, particularly in Gaza. Hundreds volunteered, traveling from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, to join the conflict: this presence, while certainly not significant from a military point of view, is nonetheless important in terms of the Brotherhood’s involvement in the ‘Palestinian cause’, and a commitment which would later generate considerable support amongst the refugees in the Gaza Strip, who recognized the *Ikhwan*’s courage in defending them and in being ready to take up arms during what became Israel’s War of Independence.¹⁰ Indeed, it is precisely the refugees from that and later wars who become the foundation of the success of the Brotherhood’s particular brand of ‘political Islam’ within the Gaza Strip. The Brotherhood provides a model for

⁹ Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington (DC) 2000, pp. 13-15.

¹⁰ Ziad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza. Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1994, pp. 2-3. Abu Amr argues that the first branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was opened in 1948 by ‘Aysh ‘Amira, and that Egyptian influence – particularly by officials in Cairo’s army such as Abdel Moneim Abdel Raouf, was very important.

the identity of a land which war had transformed utterly, and which needed new ways to imagine itself. Two things happen in Gaza: first, the presence of two hundred thousand refugees fragments a society which had relied upon the balances of power determined by the local urban and commercial Palestinian nobility. Second, the Muslim Brothers provide immediate answers to the need for identity and for social cohesion which were particularly acute in the refugee camps, amongst those who had been twice marginalized, first by the war and then by the camps, and who had lost all bearings. The radical changes brought about by the *Nakba*, by what Palestinians call ‘the catastrophe’ of 1948, and simultaneously by the new presence of an Islamist political group are crucial for Gaza’s future. As Beverly Milton-Edwards writes in her detailed account of Palestinian Islamism: “The Muslim Brotherhood also played its part, advertently or inadvertently, in widening the gap between the politicized refugee community on the one hand, and the ruling families and their supporters” on the other.¹¹ Just as would later happen between Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority, the Muslim Brotherhood stepped into “the gap left by the Waqf authorities”¹², the religious institution charged with overseeing not only the lands belonging to the ‘Islamic realm’ but also support for the poor. When the Waqf in Gaza proves “unable to support the refugee community and provide welfare”, the Muslim Brotherhood’s actions highlights “the weakness of institutional Islam in the face of new changes”¹³. And the Brotherhood provides its own answers, both ideological and practical, answers which the refugees found convincing.

In this sense, given the presence of fertile terrain such as refugee camps coupled with the events in Egypt, and especially the history of the Brotherhood across Gaza’s southern border, it is no coincidence that it is precisely in Gaza that the Muslim Brotherhood – and, after 1987, Hamas – have found their stronghold. After a brief period during which the movement had been allowed to act freely, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – and thus also the branches within the Gaza Strip – were banned by the Cairo authorities in 1949. The branch established by ‘Aish ‘Amira, however, did not close, and bypassed the ban by metamorphosing into a religious centre, the *Jamaat al-Tawheed* (the Society for Unification) which functioned as a cover in order to allow the Muslim Brotherhood to continue to work and retain its presence. In any case, the ban did not last long: the Egyptian monarchy was swept away on July 23rd, 1952 by the Revolution of Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Free Officers, who – amongst various other measures – reversed the state’s hostility towards the Ikhwan, to which some of his Free Officers themselves were affiliated.

During the first two years of the Free Officers’ Revolution, good relations between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the newborn republican regime allowed Gaza’s Islamists to carve out the necessary spaces to pursue their expansion and to consolidate particularly within the refugee camps. Here, during the early 1950s, they represented one of the largest organizations, with eleven branches and over a thousand members. There are a few documents which remain from this period, providing information such as the oath of membership carried out placing a hand on the Qur’an by members recruited in the Nuseirat refugee camp, one of the Strip’s most important: “I

¹¹ Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, op. cit., p. 43.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

promise to be a good Muslim in defending Islam and the lost land of Palestine”.¹⁴ This unadorned formula is nonetheless sufficient to hint at the nationalist drive in embryo which is the hallmark of Hamas as much as – if not more than – other groups: calling for the defense of that ‘lost land of Palestine’ gave the Ikhwan’s entry into Palestinian politics a political meaning so profound as to render adherence to the religious message only one part of militants’ motivations for joining.

Thus, the Ikhwan was consolidating its position when relations between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the new regime in Cairo shifted radically in 1954, after the failed attempt in October on Nasser’s life carried out by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the consequent decision – on behalf of the person who would later become the icon of Pan-Arab Nationalism – to place Egypt’s first President, General Muhammad Neguib, under house arrest. Relations between Nasser and Neguib had been deteriorating over the previous few months, not least over the Brotherhood, the last remaining mass movement in the country, which Nasser already wanted to ban: the failed assassination attempt allowed him to not only formally become the country’s leader through a popular referendum in 1956, but also to undertake the wave of repression against the Brotherhood which would end in over four thousand arrests and the death penalty for nearly all the upper echelons of the leadership. The harshness of the repression forced Gaza’s Islamists if not into hiding, certainly to act under cover. The specific conditions of the Strip, under military protectorate, placed the local Ikhwan in a different position, creating the preconditions for a ‘Gazan way’, a Palestinian nationalist interpretation of political Islam: Hamas. The difficulties in relations with the Muslim Brothers across the border forced local branches to increasingly define themselves in terms of the specificities of the Palestinian situation.

The Six-Day War, an event which to this day represents a fundamental rupture both morally and culturally for the entire Arab world leave Gaza with no nostalgia of their Egyptian patron, especially among the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had paid dearly for the construction of the new Nasserite Republic. On the contrary, the War represents the moment in which Gaza’s isolation is broken, the opening towards the West Bank, and the progressive consolidation of the two parts of a new Palestine alongside Israel: Gaza and the West Bank united, along with East Jerusalem, now not least under the United Nations’ newly introduced phraseology of ‘Occupied Palestinian Territory’ as defined by the 1949 armistice lines. The Gaza strip had built a new and complex identity during the two decades of Egypt’s ‘protectorate’. After 1967, it attempts to proceed in parallel to the West Bank, another scrap of Palestinian land which had had to re-write its social codes as a result of its union with the Hashemite monarchy in Amman – a kingdom which, unlike Egypt, had attempted to assimilate the Palestinian territory to the west of the Jordan river with Transjordan, a large area dominated by tribal majorities. Thanks to histories quixotic trajectories, Gaza and the West Bank proceed in parallel after 1967, but the geographical distance between Gaza City and Ramallah would never be entirely bridged, despite the Israeli occupation objectively having had the merit of bringing down the frontiers erected between the first Arab-Israeli conflict and the Six-Day War.

The parallels continue in relation to the history of Palestinian political Islam in its two components in the West Bank and in Gaza. There had been little time to build a shared framework for the Brotherhood in the two Territory before the Arab-Israeli war of

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 43-44.

1948, but the seeds planted by Hassan al-Banna had nonetheless sprouted, taking root throughout the West Bank including Jerusalem, and particularly in the South. In Hebron, for example, it seems that the role played by the battalion fielded by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was crucial in establishing a local branch.¹⁵ Later, the division between West Bank and Gaza had interrupted this common development, and Palestinian political Islam developed in two different directions, influenced by their respective temporary patrons and by the socioeconomic differences between the two Territory. While in Gaza the massive presence of refugees increasingly became the mainstay of the Brotherhood's – and later Hamas' – support, the situation in the West Bank is rather different. First, because the landscape itself is different: despite having had its links to the coast and to important cities like Haifa severed, the West Bank still has important urban centers, from Nablus all the way to Hebron. Secondly, the patronage is different: Jordan's young King Hussein has very strong links with the West Bank, towards which the Hashemite Kingdom does not hide its expansionist aims.

Before 1967, the Palestinian territory located between the armistice lines of 1949 and the river Jordan follows the administrative norms set by Amman, from land registry to pensions, from commerce to textbooks, and including political relations between Palestinian notables and the Hashemite regime. Moreover, Jordan had become the haven and new home for Palestinian refugees to the extent that the country had become unique within the Arab world. Palestinian refugees are not pariahs, confined to camps and the fragile status of statelessness as they were in Lebanon and Syria. Jordan welcomes Palestinians and integrates them, to the point of running the risk of profoundly modifying old political equilibria, as indeed happened. Palestinians are granted citizenship, a condition of which still today there are evidence signs, particularly in East Jerusalem, where many Palestinian residents still retain their Jordanian passports, rendering them at least marginally less dependent on the limbo to which Jerusalem's Palestinians have been confined after 1967, when the Jordanian Legion was defeated by Tsahal, Amman's protectorate ended, and the Israeli occupation of Arab parts of Jerusalem began.

Thus, Jordan became not only a patron controlling the West Bank, it also became the power with which to negotiate and from which to receive suggestions and offers for the entire spectrum of Palestinian politics taking shape after the *Nakba*. Towards all these groups Amman is careful to construct a politics based on co-option, particularly with respect to the elites. The case of the West Bank Ikhwan is no different, and it quickly establishes close relations with the Muslim Brothers in Amman. The Ikhwan in the West Bank is a conservative movement which initially concentrates on propagating Hassan al-Banna's school of religio-political thought throughout the population: its instruments are mosques and a network of social welfare services. After the 1948 war, the struggle against the Israelis is set aside. Rather, in line with the path followed by the Muslim Brothers across the Allenby Bridge, the West Bank Ikhwan's strategy includes what are, overall, good relations with the Hashemite regime, and with the monarch, King Hussein, in particular, who wishes to preserve the delicate equilibrium upon which his family's power rests – a power rooted in the Franco-British decision to partition of the Middle East, and thus intrinsically fragile, as were all the regimes born of Western colonialism in Arab lands.

¹⁵ Amnon Cohen, *Political Parties in the West Bank under the Jordanian Regime, 1949-67*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1982, p. 145.

The Muslim Brothers and King Hussein, therefore, wrote a history marked by a fundamental compromise: the Ikhwan, in its Jordanian and West Bank branches, accepted Hashemite authority, avoiding questioning its legitimacy, while for its part, the dynasty founded by Abdallah does not place limitations upon the organization, which receives the status and authorization necessary to run its charitable organizations. The Muslim Brotherhood is one of the few legal organizations in the country. However, they must ask for the regime's consent in order to open new branches – a consent which they receive, for example, in Jerusalem, Jericho and Bethlehem. The Brotherhood regularly participates in elections, and return deputies to Parliament. Of course, it is a relationship with its highs and lows, in which from time to time the Hashemite regime reins in the Brotherhood, only to later loosen its grip. Over the course of nearly two decades, therefore, the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan as well as in the West Bank, has witnessed alternate stages of rather contained repression, of closer surveillance on behalf of Amman's intelligence services, and of royal support on specific occasions.

This understanding is not seriously questioned by either party, despite some hiccups along the way during the 1950s, for example regarding the British presence in Jordan and Jordanian support for the Baghdad Pact, an anti-Soviet regional military alliance backed by Great Britain and by the United States. Coming between the monarchy and the Ikhwan is nearly always the pro-Western inclinations of the regime, which is, however, careful in designing its foreign policy, blending apparently contradictory positions: pro-Western policies, support for Nasser's actions in the Suez in 1956, and attacks against the typically nationalist and socialist Pan-Arabism of the late 1950s. Save friction regarding concessions to 'imperialism', the Muslim Brotherhood play the part of a largely 'loyal opposition' for the Hashemite monarchy, with which – in the words of Yusuf al-'Azam, one of the movement's leaders and parliamentary deputy in Jordan – the Ikhwan effectively stipulates a 'truce'. "We were unable to open fronts with all sides at one time" as al-'Azam explains to Ziad Abu Amr, a Palestinian historian of political Islam, later also Foreign Minister of the national unity government of spring 2007.¹⁶ "We stood with the King in order to protect ourselves, because if Nasser's followers had risen to power, or had a pro-Nasser government been established in Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood would have been liquidated just as they were liquidated in Egypt".¹⁷ Rather, the understanding between the Jordanian Brotherhood and the Hashemite regime suffers considerably as a consequence of events in the Palestinian political sphere, when the Jordanian regime and Palestinians clashed in the event which marked the lowest point of their relations: 'Black September'. The bloody repression of the *fedayeen* linked to the PLO – and of Yasser Arafat's Fatah in particular – decided upon by King Hussein in 1970 is linked to a period after the war of 1967 and the consequent detachment of the West Bank from Amman's direct control. It does, however, provide a good illustration of the West Bank Ikhwan's stance towards the monarchy, marked as it was both by a deep embarrassment, and by a clear choice of sides – in favor of the Hashemite regime.

If not everything, then certainly much changes after the *Naksa* – Palestinians themselves define the human and political trauma of 1967 – when the new borders and separations marked by Israel's blitzkrieg place an even greater distance between what lies across the borders to the east and to the south of the Occupied Territory. Paradoxically, it

¹⁶ Ziad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza*, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

is precisely the distance established between Gaza, West Bank and their respective Arab patrons which makes an entirely internal *Sonderweg* – a third way – possible, slowly detaching the destiny of Palestinians between the Green Line and the Jordan river and to the north of the Sinai from that of their brethren who had become refugees abroad. In political terms, the claim to the common rights of the entire Palestinian people would never change, but it is beyond doubt that 1967 marks the watershed between a chapter of the socio-political history of the West Bank and of Gaza under the patronage of Arab regimes, and a subsequent phase in which external influences become part of a dialectic between one actor – the Palestinians on the inside – and all the others, from the diaspora to the different states across the region. What changes the balance of power between different actors is the birth and the development of new political elites, and the deep changes to the social make-up of the West Bank and of Gaza, within which two new protagonists emerge: refugees and the young.

The Universities of the Revolt

“‘ Hamas’ founders? They became that by chance”. These words uttered by Sayyed Abu Musameh, one of the Islamist movement’s elder leaders towards the end of October 2008 in his modest garden in Gaza City, hint at the political rationale behind the birth of the Islamic Resistance Movement. Formally, Hamas was established on December 9th, 1987, in a meeting of the Political Directorate of the Muslim Brotherhood held in the house of Ahmed Yassin, taking advantage of an unforeseen opportunity, namely the outbreak of the First Intifada which engulfed Gaza and the West Bank over the following two years. The project of an operational organization derived from the Ikhwan al-Muslimun, however, had already been in the air for years.

Abu Musameh, a thin man with a calm gaze, white hair and neatly-trimmed beard, sporting an elegant gray shirt and dark trousers, explains: “The election for the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership were frequent, as was its renewal”.¹⁸ He is among Hamas’ most longstanding members, having entered the Muslim Brotherhood at the beginning of the 1970s while he was studying at University in Damascus and experiencing – as all students during those times – the clash between ideologies, the left still predominant, but political Islamism already in ascendance. Abu Musameh had been on precisely that journey, from an initial fascination with socialism to his entry into the Muslim Brotherhood, nearly simultaneous to his wife’s, who is now listening to his story with that complicity typical of old spouses, her eyes sharp and deep, hardly veiled by the frame of her small spectacles. Abu Musameh is now considered one of the more pragmatic and moderate leaders in Gaza, in good relations with the entire political leadership. A man of the so-called ‘second generation’, after that of Yassin and before Rantisi and Haniyeh, he witnessed the years of the Muslim Brotherhood. “You don’t have to belong to the Ikhwan in order to be a member of Hamas, but all Palestinian Muslim Brothers are Hamas,”¹⁹ is his way of explaining militancy in the Islamist movement, casting light upon the origins of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*. “When Hamas was established, during the First Intifada, its founders were there by

¹⁸ Author’s interview with Sayyed Abu Musameh, Gaza City, October 26th 2008.

¹⁹ Ibid.

chance: they were simply those who had been elected to the political office, the *matkab al-siyyasi* of the Muslim Brotherhood”.²⁰ Abu Musameh, himself the (secret) leader of Hamas for a year and a half around 1989, confirms the historical, factual truth which has already been established, while affording a glimpse into the far more complex context within which the movement was born. The received historical truth about Hamas’ birth is that it would not have taken place that December 9th, 1987, had it not been for the Intifada, as a popular movement ‘from below’, which accelerated the political tempo, leaving the political leadership no choice if not to enter into the political fray and attempt to ride the wave of the protest. The more complex picture, which emerges from the different witnesses of the period, is that Hamas as a project was on the cards at least since 1983, and was the result of a continuous dialogue – the conclusion of which was not at all forgone – between the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood abroad, from the Gulf to Jordan, and the leadership in the West Bank and in Gaza.²¹ This continuous dialogue was not simply the result of a discussion between different geographical and geopolitical areas of the Islamist movement, it was above all a debate – bordering on confrontation – between two generations of members, the ‘old guard’ who had reached Islamist militancy through the early Ikhwan, i.e. co-optation by the companions of Hassan al-Banna, and the ‘young’, those who embraced political Islam during the 1970s. This latter wing included those born between the 1950s and the beginning of the following decade, maturing both in the context of Palestinian high schools both within and outside the armistice borders of 1949, and in particular within universities throughout the Arab world and those which arose in the West Bank and Gaza after the Israeli occupation of 1967.

The idea of establishing an operational branch of the Ikhwan – in other words, a movement which could also act on the ground against the Israelis – dates back to 1983, and was debated in the local circles of the Muslim Brotherhood outside the West Bank and Gaza. Osama Hamdan, born 1964, and who was then a young exponent of Palestinian Islamism who had entered the organization barely a year earlier through his friendship with Khaled Meshaal, which goes back to when he was fifteen, explains: “At first, we tried to convince the leadership of the Jordanian Ikhwan of this project. It was not an easy task, but in the end the leadership in Amman accepted our idea”.²² He tells of how “the younger generation was pushing for participation in the resistance, on the basis of a principle accepted by members of both generations, both in the West Bank and in Gaza – that the resistance should be undertaken only within the Occupied Palestinian Territory”.²³ The difference between the Ikhwan on the one hand, and nationalist and left-wing factions on the other is obvious: no longer guerrilla actions abroad, in the Middle East or in Europe, as had occurred up until that point. No more hijacking of airplanes, or spectacular and bloody actions which had taken place across the Mediterranean, but clashes with the Israelis within the Territory alone, without specifying whether this meant those territories occupied in 1967 or those of Mandate Palestine.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For example, one of Hamas’ leading spiritual authorities – and one of the most conservative – in the West Bank, shaykh Hamed Bitawi, states that “if it is true that Hamas was born in Gaza, it is equally true that the debates were taking place in the West Bank as well.” Author’s interview with shaykh Hamed Bitawi, Nablus, November 2nd 2008.

²² Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th 2008.

²³ Ibid.

The Muslim Brotherhood had until that moment not participated in an obvious and integrated fashion to guerrilla actions against the Israelis. Indeed, for precisely this reason they had earned the accusation leveled from nationalist quarters of not having been good patriots – those nationalists which had given rise to the guerrilla both inside and outside the Palestinian Territory: Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the many other factions into which Palestinian politics was divided.

There was some truth to this accusation. The choice of the generation of Islamists which had lived through the *Nakba* had been to confine their activities to mosques and schools, between the Muslim version of ‘Sunday school’ and the small centre for family services. This was not, for their vision of life and of its relation with religion, a restriction in their horizons. Quite the contrary. The objective was more radical and ambitious: to shape the ‘good Palestinian Muslim’. This was the goal, because returning to Islam was considered an absolute necessity for the very moral and political future itself of their generation. The progressive distancing from Islam and from a conscious and rigorous observance to the faith in daily life had from their point of view been the principal cause of the defeat, of the loss of the land, of the *Nakba*. It was necessary to start from the pillars upon which a *normal* society is founded, it was necessary to rebuild the ethical foundations, the religious creed, traditional and conservative values. And in order to do this, it was necessary to tackle the problems related not only to customs, to *mores*, but also those related to social stability itself: the family, health, freedom from poverty, childcare, and the reconstruction of women’s traditional role as an element of social cohesion, especially in conditions as degraded as those in which refugee camps in particular found themselves.

Upon closer inspection, there is a fully-fledged political program already contained within the social program of the Muslim Brotherhood after 1967: only by rebuilding a solid identity can there also be hope of national redemption. Ahmed Yassin works on precisely this program ever since he returns to live in the Gaza Strip, after a period of studies in Egypt. A teacher by training, scarred ever since adolescence by a serious disability which would in time leave him wheelchair-bound and nearly completely immobilized, Yassin concentrates on education, through his militancy in the Ikhwan. As a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, he is arrested in 1965, when Nasser’s regime tightens its grip upon the Islamist movement, but it is only towards the end of the 1960s that Yassin becomes a point of reference for the group of young men who would later become the Hamas leadership. Early on, the group gathers in the refugee camp of al-Shati. Ismail Haniyeh, for example, who would later become the first Hamas member to head a Palestinian government, comes from this camp. Later, activities move to Gaza City, around the *Mujamma al-Islami*. The Islamic Center is born in 1973, the same year as the Yom Kippur War. A range of connected activities come together around the mosque: a small clinic, a nursing school, a women’s centre, the committee to administer *zakat* (charity, one of Islam’s Five Pillars), a sports centre, a meeting room, and later on through the years schools, kindergartens, and a blood bank.²⁴

²⁴ Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas. Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000, p. 20; Ziad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza*, op. cit., p. 16.

This is not a novelty in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, nor – upon reflection, and with all the qualifications the difference in context requires – is it a novelty in the history of many Christian ecclesiastical communities in Europe. Starting from the church, the sacred place, activities then enter into the secular world in order to help those social groups most exposed to risks owing to weaknesses which are both financial and often therefore of identity. For this kind of ecclesiastical community, the religious dimension imbues their social activities with moral and spiritual values, helping to increase the cohesiveness of society as a whole. For the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, the objective was the same: to again infuse a society torn apart by the loss of land and by the scattering of local communities a new resilience thanks to a renewed faith in Islam. This Islam is self-conscious and no longer traditional, as all those who have come into contact with the Ikhwan since the 1970s say – as though this very different and one might say even secular approach to religion had been the decisive factor in their entry into the movement.

Both in the West Bank and in Gaza, the Ikhwan had already established charitable organizations, ever since the 1960s. The difference is that traditional charities had not developed – as the *Mujamma al-Islami* had done – that political dimension which would later become increasingly important as time went on, especially once that group of young militants which was to be decisive for the birth of Hamas gathered around Yassin. During this phase, Israel was not concerned about the presence of Islamist institutions – indeed, in its own way, it favored them, by not opposing them and indeed by providing them with the necessary *imprimatur* of legality. This had already happened with charitable organizations which already operated within the Palestinian Territory before 1967, and which immediately received the official consent necessary to continue their work in the West Bank and in Gaza even after the Israeli occupation. It also happened in the case of Yassin’s *Mujamma al-Islami* which, five years after its establishment in 1978, received a license to operate from Israeli authorities.²⁵ This political stance – which Israel would maintain from 1967 until 1989, when Hamas was included in the list of terrorist organizations – is at the root of the commonly-held interpretation, in the popular press, according to which Israel itself created Hamas. During the first two decades of the occupation of the Palestinian Territory, Israel had in fact tolerated – and in some cases endorsed – the presence of the Islamists the West Bank and particularly in Gaza. It is immediately clear how such non-specialist interpretations of the rise of Palestinian Islamists are too simplistic for a movement which was never an instrument of external agents, but rather grew from within Palestinian society, where it gathered support not only for religious and social reasons but also, ultimately, for political ones.

There is also, however, a grain of truth in the stereotypical reading of events. It is true that Israel, during a specific phase of the post-1967 occupation, allowed the Islamist movement room for maneuver by means of concession of licenses to run social and socio-religious organizations such as the *Mujamma al-Islami*. It is also true that organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood were more easily able to obtain authorizations necessary compared to similar organizations linked to nationalist and secular factions within the Palestinian political spectrum. In a 1981 interview to the

²⁵ The registration request for the *Jamiyyat Jawrat al-Shams al-Islamiyya*, the *Mujamma*’s official name, was presented on August 4th, 1977, signed by Ya’cub Othman Qwaik, and addressed to the Israeli military authorities. See Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, op. cit., p. 204.

International Herald Tribune, the then military governor of the Gaza district, General Yitzhak Sager also said that the Israeli government had “given him a budget and that the military governorate had given it to the mosques. [...] The funds were used for both mosques and religious schools, with the purpose of strengthening a force that runs counter to the pro-PLO leftists”. As Beverly Milton-Edwards – one of Political Islam’s most prestigious scholars – explains, they were ““all signs of classic *divide et impera* policy. Israel’s benign encouragement of the Islamic movement was designed to strengthen Islam in the face of nationalists in the form of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). By nurturing a conservative and traditional trend, the Israeli authorities hoped to diminish the progressive and radical appeal of the movement for national liberation”²⁶.

In truth, half way through the 1980s an exception emerged with regard to the Islamist front’s decision to concentrate its work on social services and in the formation of the good Muslim, namely the commandos of Islamic Jihad, a relatively new political organization born in 1982, despite an already long list of terrorist attacks against Israeli military personnel and against settlers. In itself, the arrival of Islamic Jihad on the political scene – itself established by two former members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Fathi al-Shiqaqi and Abdel Aziz ’Auda – had forced the Ikhwan to ask itself with increasing insistence the crucial question concerning its participation in the ‘resistance’, namely whether the time had come to add to the socio-religious work the organization had been engaged in for decades a strictly speaking military activity analogous to that undertaken by other Palestinian factions.

It is the weakness of the PLO at the time which acts as a dampener in the discussion which is taking place between the young generation of the Muslim Brotherhood both within and beyond the Occupied Palestinian Territory. So much so that the decision to establish an operational branch of the Palestinian Ikhwan is taken in the immediate aftermath of Operation Peace in Galilee in 1982 and of the ensuing occupation of southern Lebanon which had struck the hardest blow of all against the PLO, forcing Yasser Arafat and the organization’s leadership to abandon the bases built in Beirut towards an even more difficult exile. The images of the PLO’s rout in Lebanon, of Arafat abandoning Beirut in August 1982 aboard the *Odysseus Elytis* play an important role in convincing at least a part of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood to go beyond the religious and cultural dimension, and to push for direct confrontation with the Israelis. The Israelis, for their part, had shifted the political centre of gravity as a result of Likud coming to power after decades of Labor governments. The first right-wing government in Israel, in 1977, and the strengthening of movements such as *Gush Emunim* (Bloc of the Faithful), the vanguard of the settlers, which explicitly linked itself to religious Zionism, had in turn made the context more favorable to the simultaneous growth of Palestinian political Islam.

The internal crisis of the Palestinian world epitomized by the PLO’s weakness is, at any rate, only one of the causes behind a process – the emergence of political Islam – which goes well beyond the confines of the West Bank and Gaza. Rather, it is part of a region-wide phenomenon which unites Gaza City with Cairo, Ramallah to Damascus, Kuwait City to the other Arab capitals within which the student movement reached a level of politicization similar to that experienced in European universities a few years

²⁶ Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, op. cit., p. 104.

earlier. It is precisely within Arab universities – Palestinian institutions included – during the 1970s that those new elites which would have a radical impact on Middle Eastern history are forged, because it is here that the most important political clash of the time takes place between the forces of the left – particularly Marxists – and a political Islam in strong ascendance. These are the years immediately after the defeat of Arab forces in general and of Nasserite Pan-Arabism in particular in the Six-Day War of 1967, as well as the years after the last Arab-Israeli conflict in 1973, the years in which the policies pursued by Anwar al-Sadat sustain the growth of Islamism in universities and repress left-wing movements. The revolution guided by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran in 1979 takes place half way along a trajectory which had already been developing for nearly a decade on other foundations, and is therefore neither a cause of Islamist growth in the Arab world nor a model which interests the majority of Islamists, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and by the range of movements which would later merge into the Ikhwan. If anything, the revolution in Tehran becomes a drive for Sunni Arab political Islamism to continue its struggle against local regimes, given what had happened to the Shah Reza Pahlavi.

Within the Arab landscape, Palestinian universities are no exception. Indeed, it is precisely between the 1970s and 1980s that a mass student movement proper takes shape. Paradoxically, everything happens after 1967, when the Israeli occupation allows the West Bank and Gaza to be reunited, so to speak, and thanks to the decision by the Administration in Tel Aviv to include among its principles the autonomy of education, severing it from the Arab countries which had up until that point been the destinations of choice for that part of Palestinian youth which wished to continue studying. Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood's so-called 'third generation' takes shape within universities, in those recently created in the West Bank, and as far as Gaza is concerned, in Egyptian universities, which would continue to welcome quotas of Palestinian students until the middle of the 1970s. Even more than the activists of the secular and nationalist movements, of Fatah, the two Palestinian communist parties, and of the Popular Front, young Islamists come from the lower social strata, and no longer from those elites which had sent their children to study abroad before 1967. Many came from refugee camps and from rural areas, and at university they seek a moral, political and national redemption. But university campuses also offer that political autonomy which becomes a fertile terrain for the birth of an elite not completely dominated by the Palestinian leadership in exile, namely that of the PLO: a new elite which would later have given rise to the First Intifada. These students also benefit from a similar autonomy with respect to the mosques, where Islamist discourse was cultivated along traditionally conservative lines. The mosques were controlled by the Ministry of Waqf, the religious authority charged with administering Muslim property, and therefore necessarily in direct communication with the Israeli administration of the Occupied Territory. Universities, on the other hand, offered a neutral territory within which the seeds of political Islam could grow.²⁷

The personal experience of Farhat As'ad – one of Hamas' leaders in the West Bank, who organized the campaign in the run-up to the Palestinian elections of January 2006 – is exemplary in this sense and helps understand why and how much the Ikhwan could appeal to a generation of youngsters. In his own words: "The son of refugees in the

²⁷ Glenn E. Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: the Incomplete Revolution*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis, 1997, p. 138.

Ramle area, I grew up in a small village near Ramallah, A-Tira, in an environment within which being religious meant being tied to traditions more than it meant being conscious of being religious”.²⁸ His personal watershed came after high school, thanks to his meeting with Bassam Jarrar, then one of the Muslim Brotherhood’s best-known preachers. Farhat As’ad continues, saying that “Jarrar published texts which asked people to be conscious of their religiosity”, explaining his own choice as a “passage from traditional religion to religion in politics” – a choice which many in the A-Tira college shared: “between 1980 and 1982 the student council had been taken over by the Islamists. Over half of the students were from Gaza, and were with the Muslim Brotherhood”.²⁹

The A-Tira college is only one of the cases which area repeated in Gaza City, in Nablus, in Hebron, and even in the secular and left-wing campus *par excellence*, Bir Zeit in Ramallah. The early 1980s sees the entry into Palestinian campuses of a new actor in student politics: political Islam. Despite repeated attempts by leftist nationalist factions to establish a common front to defeat the so-called ‘amirs’, the lists linked to the Muslim Brotherhood gained a considerable degree of consensus well before Hamas appeared: indeed, between 1979 and 1981 they gained control of the majority of technical institutes in the West Bank and in Gaza.³⁰ There would be victories and defeats of greater or lesser import over the following years, but one element is certain: ever since the end of the 1970s, militant Palestinian politics within universities witnesses the birth of an additional protagonist, namely the Islamism which would later evolve into Hamas. The debate between different tendencies within universities would soon become outright political clashes reaching the highest levels – a clash in which, if anything, it is campuses which become arenas for broader confrontations. The clashes which took place during the early 1980s – at the Al-Najah University in Nablus in 1981, at the Hebron Polytechnic in 1982, at the Islamic University in Gaza City in June 1983 (at the end of which there would be over two hundred injured), and at Bir Zeit in Ramallah that same year – are the litmus tests of the growing conflict between the factions adhering to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Islamist front, which does not belong to the PLO. In time, the conflict would have crystallized as a duel between Fatah and the Islamists, with the leftist factions taking on from time to time different attitudes towards their rivals.

As well as being a place of very real clashes between PLO and Islamists, the Islamic University in Gaza City has always been of great symbolic significance for Palestinian Islamism: ever since its establishment in 1978, the Muslim Brotherhood have explicitly considered it one of the pillars of their organization both in terms of proselytism, in terms of formation of the Ikhwan’s elites, and as a stronghold of intellectual and political power within the Strip. The Islamic University, which still hosts thousands of students every year, has, for example, been the recipient of large amounts of funds from Gulf countries, such as the one hundred and fifty thousand dollars donated in 1978 by the Islamic Development Fund, an outgrowth of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and subject to the powerful influence of the Saudi royal family.³¹ Ever since its establishment, and still today, a considerable slice of Hamas’ cadres passed

²⁸ Author’s interview with Farhat As’ad, Ramallah, 15 October 2008.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Emile Sahliyeh, *In Search of Leadership: West Bank Politics Since 1967*, Brookings Institution Press, Brookings 1988, p. 145.

³¹ Ziad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza*, op. cit., p. 140.

through the university's ranks, and the University itself has been the terrain for political struggles surrounding not so much the internal equilibria of student politics (the Student Council has nearly always been controlled by a massive Islamist majority), as much as the relations between PLO, Fatah and the Ikhwan in Gaza itself, where Yassin's political influence was increasing.³² This also explains the 'attention', so to speak, which Islamists have reserved for Gaza University, the early history of which witnessed frequent intimidation – spilling over into threats and physical clashes – against secular groups. For the Muslim Brothers, the role of the university in Gaza as a power centre could not be challenged.

For Palestine within the borders of the 1949 armistice, University politics became the place in which a new elite was forged, partially autonomous from the existing brands of traditional politics – autonomous at least from an intellectual point of view and in terms of local control, if not in financial terms. There were several different causes for the internal Palestinian elites' partial detachment from the PLO, from Fatah, from the various factions into which the Popular Front had divided over the years: for a start, there was the PLO's defeat in Beirut, with the scattering of its leadership and of its activists in new refuges across the Arab world. Moreover, Israeli repression had itself contributed to the emergence of a younger generation, as between September 1967 and the end of 1970 they deported hundreds of exponents of Palestinian cadres outside the Occupied Territory, including at least 150 religious dignitaries, political leaders, mayors, teachers, professionals, and technicians, whose absence would impoverish the intellectual fabric of the West Bank in particular³³, but would have simultaneously opened the door for the entry of a different elite.

In the diaspora too, among the masses of Palestinian refugees, the generation shaped between the late Seventies and the early Eighties defines itself as an elite which has decided to count for something in future politics. This is especially true within the most numerous exile community, across Gulf countries, and in Kuwait in particular. It is Khaled Meshaal himself, who guided Hamas' political office from abroad ever since the step back taken by Moussa Abu Marzouq half way through the Nineties, who confirms this version of events and gives a primary role to the so-called 'Kuwaitis'. The 'Kuwaitis' were those young Islamists who grew up in the Emirate's populous Palestinian diaspora, where hundreds of thousands of refugees who rebuilt a life for themselves, at least until 1991, the year of Saddam Hussein's Iraq's invasion and of the Second Gulf War. For over four decades, after 1948 and even more so after the Six-Day War, Kuwait had welcomed Palestinians with open arms, Palestinians who had in turn provided a more or less skilled labor force. The Palestinians had established a structured community, a sort of 'Little Palestine', complete with associations, groups, and schools supported by the PLO. It is precisely in one such school, for example, that a young Khaled Meshaal – born in 1956, refugee from the village of Silwad near Ramallah during the *Naksa*, the 1967 war – had grown up. His presence, like that of many other men who would become Hamas leaders, was considered confirmation of the role and importance of the 'Kuwaitis' in the birth of the Islamist movement in 1987. It is certain that, in the history of the Palestinian diaspora in the Middle East, the emirate was the most fecund country for post-1948 politics. Yasser Arafat had been to Kuwait, and Fatah's first strong nucleus

³² Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, op. cit., pp. 108-114.

³³ Ziad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza*, op cit., p. 33.

took shape there, and Kuwait would also witness the development of the core of Islamist students of which Meshaal was one of the best-known names.³⁴ Confirmation of this version are the aftershocks the Islamist movements has to confront in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War: Hamas fields its good relations with the Emirate in order to tackle the consequences of Arafat's pro-Iraqi position.

Thus, after 1982, the parallel paths of Islamists within the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in the diaspora merge into the operational branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West Bank and Gaza. The idea begins to take shape a year later, when a secret conference of the Palestinian Ikhwan is held in Amman.³⁵ According to Khaled Meshaal, it is at this very conference which Hamas acquires the form in which went public in December 1987: a structure formed by members from Gaza, from the West Bank and in exile. The Hamas project is thus built over the four years which separate the conference from the outbreak of the First Intifada. It is in 1983 in particular that the Muslim Brothers start becoming more visibly present in demonstrations against the Israelis, particularly – and not coincidentally – in the demonstrations against the occupation of South Lebanon, on the first anniversary of Operation Peace in Galilee, building up to actions defined as “civil resistance, including boycotts and clashes with Israeli soldiers, no longer extemporaneous, but decided from on high, by the institutions”.³⁶ In 1986, the clashes between Palestinians and Israelis had become weekly events, while in parallel, still according to Khaled Meshaal's version of events recounted to Mouin Rabbani in the March 2008 edition of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, a decision was being taken concerning the division of the organization itself into two sections, one which would remain internal to the Occupied Territory, and another abroad. That year also saw the definition of the organizational structure, of the political program, objectives, and leadership, as confirmed by Hamas' representative in Lebanon, Osama Hamdan³⁷, who would later be inserted by American President George W. Bush into the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists alongside another five Hamas leaders.

In the meantime, in Gaza, shaykh Ahmed Yassin is one of the few, aside from a group of loyal supporters, who knows about the intimate details of the project, and who subscribes to it. In a post hoc reading, the confirmation of this comes from his arrest in itself: in April 1984, a military tribunal sentences him to thirteen years in prison for possession of weapons, which were found at his house and at other locations. The security forces had quickly uncovered the group of people who, under Yassin's guidance, had begun to stash weapons: it was the first step towards armed struggle by at least a part of the Muslim Brotherhood, but at the time the Israeli investigators did not fully grasp the true significance of the project behind the hiding of a few rifles. The exit from the scene of the head of the *Mujamma al-Islami*, however, is only temporary, because Yassin is freed exactly one year later, in May 1985, as part of the agreement for a prisoner exchange between Israel and Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). The Hamas project thus resumes, avoiding the

³⁴ “Khalid Mishal: The Making of a Palestinian Leader”, interview by Mouin Rabbani, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 37, n. 3, Spring 2008, issue 147, pp. 59-73.

³⁵ Azzam Tamimi indicates the country in which the 1983 conference took place, whereas the Hamas leaderships do not specify the location. Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas. Unwritten Chapters*, Hurst & Co., London 2007, p. 45.

³⁶ Author's interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th 2008.

³⁷ Ibid.

mistakes which had led to the Israeli discovery of the arms. Everything becomes more organized and, in particular, more clandestine: alongside the *Mujamma al-Islami*, Yassin establishes at least two structures. One, known as *Majd* (Arabic for ‘glory’), guided by Yahya Sanwar and Ruwi Mushtaha, is a fully fledged security organization which has as its primary goal to detect and strike the Palestinian informers which the Israelis had managed to recruit over the years. The *Munazzamat al-Jihad wa’l-Da’wa*, from which the acronym MAJD, had intelligence goals as well as the task of undertaking the punishment and often executing the death sentence against collaborators, while the attacks carried out in the Gaza Strip against the Israeli military and against the Settlers were to be undertaken by a separate organization, lead by Salah al-Shehadeh, who would later also establish Hamas’ armed wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

Yassin was acting unbeknownst to the traditional leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. As Ismail Abu Shanab, who had until 1989 been the true (but secret) leader of Hamas, even above Yassin, explained to the International Crisis Group (ICG) a few days before being killed in a targeted assassination by the Israeli air force in August 2003: “The period 1983-1987 marked the phase of direct preparation for resistance to the occupation, including armed struggle. Shaykh Ahmed Yassin took the lead in this, and did so independently of the Muslim Brotherhood”.³⁸ So much so that still in 1987, at the time of the First Intifada, within the Muslim Brotherhood there existed two schools of thought: the line of classical politics (*al-siyyasa al-klasikiyya*) which was endorsed by the older generation, while the so-called ‘renewal tendency’, *tajdid*, had in Shaykh Yassin its most notable exponent. It based its strategy essentially on two points: on the one hand, the use of tools of resistance such as strikes, demonstrations and full-blown military struggle against the Israeli occupation; on the other hand, the expansion of those units which were already characteristic of the Muslim Brotherhood – namely the *usra*, families – through the appearance of more strictly speaking operational organs. It was clear that Yassin’s strategy could not remain concealed for long. According to Osama Hamdan’s reconstruction, the decision to publicly declare the birth of Hamas dates to October 1987.³⁹ The first document which uses the organization’s full name and distributed in the West Bank and in Gaza appears on October 6th – a document to which the press pays scant attention. The old generation then decides that it is better to shorten the name, just as Fatah had done many years before. Thus the acronym HAMAS is born. The birthing process of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*, however, is accelerated by an event the historical importance of which no one had anticipated: the First Intifada bursts onto the political scene in December, and everything in Palestinian politics changes.

It all started in Gaza. A coincidence?

The attacks against Israeli settlers and soldiers increased considerably over the years 1986-87, and not just in the West Bank, where *Gush Emunim*, the ideological vanguard of the settler movement, had begun its expansionist adventure in the wake of the Six-Day War by establishing Kiryat Arba not far from Hebron. Eventually, settlements had also appeared in Gaza, a sliver of land already crippled by poverty and by the presence of

³⁸ International Crisis Group, “Dealing with Hamas”, *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 21, 26 January 2004, p. 6.

³⁹ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th 2008.

hundreds of thousands of refugees in the aftermath of the 1948 and 1967 wars. The first settlements, Netzarim and Morag, had been built in 1972, followed by a succession of small settlements throughout the following decade which were certainly important in terms of popular consensus, but whose primary rationale was military and strategic. settlements such as Nisanit and Elei Sinai had had their primary objective to absorb the inhabitants of Yamit, the Israeli settlement built in the heart of the Sinai and abandoned after the peace treaty signed with Egypt. Other settlements had the strategic objective of splitting the unity and the communication lines within the Gaza Strip, in order to obtain as complete a control of the territory as possible.⁴⁰ Settlements and military control also had other consequences, such as establishing a road network upon which Israelis and Palestinians would brush past each other on a daily basis. Such a situation could not, in a moment of tension, but give rise to a *casus belli*. Like the one which sparked the First Intifada.

In 1987, Gaza was a kind of dormitory, in economic terms. About seventy thousand men would make the daily trip to work in Israel with legal contracts of employment, while it is estimated that another thirty-five thousand would make the trip illegally. Thus, at least half a million people lived off those salaries earned in Israel – a predicament which left few opportunities for economic development within Gaza and which – on the contrary – forced the Strip into that unique condition of weakness which Sara Roy first dubbed ‘de-development’, that is to say a process of “deliberate, systematic and progressive dismemberment of an indigenous economy by a dominant one, where economic – and, by extension, societal – potential is not only distorted, but denied”.⁴¹ This thesis therefore blames the Israelis for having consciously prevented a gradual economic autonomy from developing inside the Palestinian Occupied Territory. Gaza included.

Off to work in Israel in the morning, back at home in the evening, returning to the Strip’s refugee camps, to those towns hypertrophied after the mass arrival of refugees from across the border. On their way home were also the workers who, during the evening of December 8th, 1987, were accidentally run over by an Israeli truck, two days after the killing in Gaza of a settler carried out by a member of the Islamic Jihad. Tension was therefore already high in the Strip: the opportunities for friction between Israelis and Palestinians as they brushed past each other on the roads of Gaza, were frequent. Thus, when the two cars upon which the Palestinian workers were traveling were run over, killing four passengers in the accident, it was as though a match had been struck next to dry hay, hay which took fire the following day in Jabalia, the refugee camp in the northern area of the Strip from which three of the dead came. The funerals in Jabalia became student protests, the protests became a revolt, and the Intifada spread first throughout Gaza, and then all the way to the West Bank.⁴²

Twenty-four hours after the accident in Jabalia, the political office of the Muslim Brotherhood was summoned in a small apartment in the poor quarter of Sabra, in Gaza City. The location is the house of shaykh Ahmed Yassin, who was already considered the Ikhwan’s reference in the Strip. At the meeting were ’Abdel Fattah al-Dukhan,

⁴⁰ See Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation*, Verso, London 2007, p. 70, on the ‘five fingers’ strategy.

⁴¹ Sara Roy, *Failing Peace. Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, op. cit, p.33.

⁴² Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza. Days and Nights in a Land Under Siege*, op. cit., pp. 34 ff..

Mohammed Shama', Ibrahim al-Yazouri, Issa al-Nasshar, Salah Shehadeh, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi and the landlord, Ahmed Yassin. It was necessary to decide what to do after the disturbances which – as would later become clear – had sparked something less episodic than a simple confrontation between Palestinians and the Israeli army, triggering the most important revolt in contemporary Palestinian history. It was not the organized factions of the political landscape who planned the Intifada, which was truly – at its inception – a spontaneous movement, the most evident representation of the fact that in the Occupied Palestinian Territory a political consciousness was being born independent of the institutions of exile – first and foremost the PLO. For Ahmed Yassin, the outbreak of the First Intifada, however, provides an important opportunity to bring to fruition the project begun four years earlier. In Azzam Tamimi's words, the Intifada "provides Yassin the best moment"⁴³ to create Hamas, but it does not change its objectives.

The Intifada of the Stones, the *Intifadat al-Oula*, the first uprising as Palestinians call it, makes a quick decision necessary, without further deliberations or delays. Overcoming the internal divisions and the doubts of the older generation of Muslim Brothers, who are also present at the founding meeting, the seven participants decide to underwrite Yassin's strategy: the Ikhwan must give itself an operational group capable of entering the fray and taking part in the Intifada. Hamas' founding document, for example, states: "When the idea matured, the seed grew, and the plant took root in reality detached from the temporary emotional outburst and unwelcome haste, the Islamic Resistance Movement came forth to perform its role of struggle for the sake of its Lord"⁴⁴. This document, which was made public nine months later, provides a glimpse of the trajectory which brought the project which Yassin had pushed for to fruition, as well as the influence of the Revolt of the Stones in bringing forward its timing. The decision to establish Hamas however, was not simply the result of a historical accident, but rather is born from the changes – not least sociologically – which had taken place within the Muslim Brotherhood, which during the second half of the 1980s no longer represented that mercantile and bourgeois class which prompted its birth and growth in Palestine towards the end of the 1940s. Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, is the result of historical changes in Palestinian society, devastated by the war of 1948 and by the establishment of the State of Israel. So much so that the decision to establish Hamas was taken by the refugees, by those who sought refuge in the Strip after the Nakba, the catastrophe of 1948: of the seven participants at that meeting, six were refugees – only one was born in Gaza. Refugees who came from the small villages of rural Palestine, certainly, but these were also people who had a degree of higher education, often professionals. This was the profile of the new Islamist who gives life to Hamas.

The provenance from among the refugees is itself not a simple sociological accident: on the contrary, it explains much of the program pursued by the Islamist movement, its strategies and the very forms of resistance against the Israelis decided upon during certain phases, and it speaks of the younger generation who, after having pushed for Hamas' establishment, would become its leaders at the dawn of the new

⁴³ Author's interview with Azzam Tamimi, London, July 12th 2008.

⁴⁴ Hamas Charter in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit., p.269.

millennium.⁴⁵ Shaykh Ahmed Yassin, born 1938, a teacher, had arrived in Gaza from the village of al-Joura, near the contemporary city of Ashkelon – the same village from which the family of the future prime minister Ismail Haniyeh came, as did the family of another leader of the 2005-2007 period, Said Siyyam, strongman of the Executive Force, killed on January 15th, 2009, during Operation Cast Lead, by an aerial bombardment which literally destroyed the Gaza City building he was in at the time along with one of his sons, his brother and his brother's family. Nearly the same age as shaykh Yassin was Mohammed Hassan Shama'a, while pharmacist Ibrahim al-Yazouri was only two years younger than Yassin, and came from the village of Beit Daras. Then there were the younger representatives, in particular Salah Shehadeh and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi: the former was a social worker, born to a family of refugees from Jaffa in the Shati refugee camp in Gaza, while he latter was a pediatrician born barely a year before the *Nakba* in the village of Yibna, north of Ashkelon, and who grew up in Khan Younis. Their names would become important amongst the Hamas *Nomenklatura* in Gaza – important enough that the Israelis decided their elimination between 2002 and 2004. Shehadeh and Rantisi were fully part of that generation which marked a watershed in the history of the Palestinian Ikhwan.

What does this provenance mean in political and programmatic terms? First and foremost it means that with Hamas the question of refugees becomes central. Such a claim might appear paradoxical given the fact that in those very years the nationalist and secular Palestinian leadership was epitomized by the diaspora, the cadres in exile, by groups of activists which moved from one Arab capital to another. And yet, over time, Hamas' roots in the world of refugee camps both inside and outside Palestine's pre-1967 borders, became its distinctive trait with respect to other Palestinian political movements: the leaders have been and are still today nearly all refugees or sons of refugees, and in itself the two-pronged leadership – within the West Bank and Gaza, and outside the borders of PNA Palestine – confirms just how important this origin is for Hamas' very character. Moreover, it is this very origin which returns the question of refugees center stage in the confrontation with Israel, explaining also why it has not been possible for the Islamist leadership to disavow the idea of a *return to Palestine* – not simply for ideological reasons, but as a result of the very identity of a considerable portion of its cadres. Over the years, the point relating to the right of return for refugees had always been formally made by the PNA, but in reality it had been set aside when it came to crucial questions of Jerusalem, of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and the final borders between Israel and a Palestinian state. But for Hamas the idea of *refuge* remains a central, constitutive theme, not least because it has been in Gaza – whose population is largely composed of refugees – that Hamas has found its most fertile terrain.

Thus, it is not simply the 'old guard' who is present at the meeting in Yassin's house. On the contrary, the presence of many among the 'young' confirms the interpretation according to which Hamas' birth took place as a kind of coup within the Muslim Brotherhood: a generational and social coup, an ascent to power by that increasingly numerous wing of militants made of refugees, of their sons, and of new young professionals who had reached political maturity in Egyptian universities and in

⁴⁵ Amal Jamal, *The Palestinian National Movement. Politics of Contention 1967-2005*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2005, pp. 106-110. Jamal also provides a table with the sociological provenance and degree of instruction for Hamas leaders.

Palestinian universities in particular. Imad al-Faluji, who was at the time one of Hamas' leaders but was later expelled for having a more pragmatic and flexible position, for example, has stated that "the young people in the movement were violent and rebellious. They sometimes engaged in actions without consulting the traditional leadership, which was not fully convinced of the need for confrontation".⁴⁶ Shaykh Ahmed Yassin acted as a sort of link between these generations: much older than Hamas' recalcitrant young, yet very different from that mercantile class which resisted the birth of Hamas, he shared with the younger generation those roots within the refugee camps which would have furnished the Islamist movement both the bedrock of its support and the cadres of the organization within the Occupied Palestinian Territory over the first two decades of its existence. It was particularly in the Gaza Strip's refugee camps that the new generation of the Muslim Brotherhood – and hence also of Hamas – was forged. The old guard, on the other hand, shared across the West Bank and Gaza a popularity within the ranks of that mercantile class which had been the hallmark of the early Ikhwan. For the period preceding 1967 it has been calculated that at least a quarter of the Brotherhood's membership was drawn from traders and landowners, and that about another 40 percent was divided among intelligentsia, workers and peasants.⁴⁷

Ahmed Yassin had to take on the opposition not just of the Ikhwan in Gaza, but also the fractious West Bankers, where those who acted as a bridge between Yassin and the Ikhwan took at least one week to overcome resistance within the organization, and it took forty days for them to get Hamas underway there, mostly thanks to the role played by Jamal Hamami in the Jerusalem area and beyond.

The first document signed with the organization's full name, *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*, and distributed publicly a few days later, on December 14th⁴⁸, bears all the hallmarks of a document written in a conflict situation, where the essential drive is towards the struggle. Within the folds of the 'call to arms' ("Our sons and youths who love the eternal life in heaven more than our enemies love this life", "Our people know the way of sacrifice and martyrdom and are generous in this regard"), there are however some political indications which would define Hamas in years to come, both in relation to the Israelis and in relation with secular nationalist groups. In this sense, it is no coincidence that according to some the document was penned by Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi⁴⁹, one of the closest to Yassin, as well as the most important leader of the Ikhwan's youth movement, at least at that time. The document's central paragraph in itself says much about the slant which the new leadership wished to give Hamas in 1987: "The Intifada of our vigilant people in the Occupied Territory comes as a resounding rejection of the

⁴⁶ Dia'a Rashwan (ed.) *The Spectrum of Islamist Movements*, Al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies, Verlag Hans Schiler, Berlin 2007, p.110.

⁴⁷ Ziad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza*, op. cit., p. 6. Amnon Cohen, *Political Parties in the West Bank under the Jordanian Regime, 1949-1967*, op. cit., pp. 162-164.

⁴⁸ Flier republished in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit. p. 265. The precise chronology of Hamas communiqués is still subject to debate amongst historians. According to Jean-François Legrain, a scholar who has catalogued fliers, communiqués and documents on the First Intifada in general, the Hamas' true organizational phase begins with its fourth communiqué, dated February, 11th, 1988, while the use of the acronym HAMAS, meaning 'zeal', begins during May-June 1988. See Jean-François Legrain "The Islamic Movement and the Intifada", in Jamal R. Nassar and Roger Heacock (eds.), *Intifada. Palestine at the Crossroads*, Bir Zeit University and Praeger, New York, 1991, p. 182.

⁴⁹ Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas. Unwritten Chapters*, op. cit., p. 11.

occupation and its pressures, land confiscation and the planting of settlements, and the policy of subjugation by the Zionists”.⁵⁰ Again: The Intifada has come “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 document also justifies violence, which was considered necessary after over twenty years during which the Muslim Brotherhood had abstained from participating in guerrilla actions: let the Israelis “understand that violence breeds nothing but violence, and that death bestows [nothing] but death. How true is the adage ‘I am drowning: why would I fear being wet?’”. The recipients of this message are addressed with the precision which is the hallmark of those who know their constituency well: “Our people, our cities, our refugee camps and our villages”. Hence the recipe, the same which the Muslim Brotherhood had prescribed, at least until a few years earlier: “The Intifada is here to convince [the Palestinians] that Islam is the solution and the alternative”⁵¹.

Over the course of its history, Hamas has always described its origins, not without a good dose of ambiguity, as directly linked to the First Intifada. The leadership maintain that the first ‘martyr’, the first *shaheed* of the Intifada, was in fact an activist of the Islamist movement who died in Jabalia – a way of clarifying that the link between the birth of the movement and popular revolt is unbreakable. However, as was the case for Fatah, the most credible explanation is that the Intifada was indeed a revolt born ‘from below’, and from within the Occupied Palestinian Territory. If there is on the one hand a measure of truth in Hamas’ explanation of its own birth, this can be found in the relationship between the Islamist movement and popular uprisings, which was much more direct than that between the revolt’s leadership and the institutional structures of the organizations represented within the PLO.

In sum, even if Hamas developed along a trajectory prior to and independent of the Intifada, the choice of entering the political fray the day after the beginning of the Revolt of the Stones confirms that Hamas has always found its reason and its strength in its link to the population. This is the reason why it is at root a mass, popular movement, indeed perhaps more than Fatah ever was, particularly in that part of its history which links it to its role within the Palestinian National Authority. This role transformed Fatah into a party-state, or at least into a ‘party-government’, which grafted the Authority, the *sulta*, over both the exiled leadership which installed itself in Ramallah after 1994 and the local Fatah potentates, who over the years then lost touch with their rank and file. Hamas, even more than the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, had always been different, precisely because of its ability in keeping its finger on the pulse of population and of more generically Islamist civil society.

Thus, it does not seem to be a coincidence that Hamas’ birth, albeit accelerated by events, should take place after the Jabalia riots, which would have coalesced into a full-blown revolt – an *intifada* – only over the course of the following days and weeks. At least one part of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership in Gaza – namely Yassin and the younger generation – appears to have intuited that the embryo of the revolt would not remain a flash in the pan, and that such a revolt was a wave which had to be ridden in order to bring to fruition the project which had been conceived four years before. The

⁵⁰ The full text of the first communiqué can be found in English in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit., pp. 265-266. All subsequent citations are drawn from this text.

⁵¹ Ibid.

very idea of establishing an operational wing of the Muslim Brotherhood is in itself linked to the organization's relationship with popular support. As Osama Hamdan recalls: "Amongst us Islamist students the question was: how can we build a resistance movement without financial support from Arab states and after the PLO's defeat in Lebanon? Other movements received support from individual countries – Fatah, for example, received support from Egypt. Our answer was: we must build our support amongst the people. And we knew the people".⁵² Of course, this is a partial explanation, entirely internal to the organization of the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the base from which it gathered consensus, yet the very importance given to this support as a determining factor in Hamas' establishment provides an indication of how important this connection was and continues to be.

The relationship with popular support and with the interpretation Hamas has offered of the Palestinian population's needs emerges not only from what the Islamist movement has done during its first two decades, but also from its internal documents. A political strategy document dated 1992, for example, claims that "our true power lies in our popularity while Fatah's instead is a combination of financial resources and control of the most important institutions".⁵³ Both the leadership of Hamas itself and Islamist scholars such as Azzam Tamimi speak of an undoubted sensitivity towards what the population thinks of the strategies the movement has adopted over time. Bassam Na'im, then health minister of the *de facto* government lead by Ismail Haniyeh which has run Gaza after the June 2007 coup, concludes that Hamas' choice to participate in electoral politics was rooted in the fact that people had grown 'tired': Palestinians were worn out by the wave of terrorist attacks and by the Second Intifada, and they would not have understood (or sustained) the continuation of widespread violence.

⁵² Author's interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

⁵³ Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, op. cit., p. 128.

Chapter 2: Snapshots from Hamas' world

The orphans of Al-Salah

The sea just beyond the houses at Dayr al-Balah is swelling. Yet, among the low-rising houses of the village known as the 'monastery of dates', famous for its palm trees and a vegetation which makes it look like the snapshot of an Egyptian suburb, the sound of the winter sea becomes hushed. It is not the sea's strong undertow which breaks the silence in Dayr al-Balah, in the middle of the Strip, barely ten kilometers from Gaza City, but the strident tones of the old loudspeaker which continuously croaks out slogans while the men of this quarter, accompanied by their sons, slowly move towards a space covered by a tarpaulin. Dozens of white plastic chairs await the funeral-goers on their way to express their condolences to the family and fulfill the rites of mourning. The dead were members of Hamas' armed wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, units which carry the name of the brigand-shaykh who lead the revolt against the British Mandatory authorities and against Zionist settlements during the 1930s. Suleiman al-Houly was twenty. No one knows for certain how old Abdul Rahman Abu Ghaza and Salman Dakrani were. All three died when a missile launched by an Israeli jet hit the *Kata'eb al-Qassam*, the Brigades' branch in Dayr al-Balah.

Dayr al-Balah is still – at least in theory – divided between a refugee camp hosting twenty thousand inhabitants and a town home to a further fifty thousand, but nothing remains of old Darum City's ancient past dating to the time of the Crusades and the Knights Templar, much less of its Bronze Age treasures, which can now be admired in Jerusalem's Israeli Museum instead, having been taken away by the Archaeological Authorities of the Jewish State. Indeed, many of the precious anthropomorphic sarcophagi ended up in Moshe Dayan's private collection – a general well-known for his archaeological 'hobby' – only to be acquired by Israel's largest museum after the general's death. But Dayr al-Balah is too enmeshed in this painful contemporary history, caught between the conflict and the deep blue sea, between dust and palms, to recall that it was once one of the cultural cradles of Hellenism. Before the withdrawal, before the closure of the Israeli settlements abandoned in August 2005, Dayr al-Balah was crushed between the two settler towns of Kfar Darom and Netzarim, disbanded when the then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided that defending around almost nine thousand settlers surrounded by a Palestinian population nearing one and a half million was counterproductive. The conflict, however, was already part of the very fabric of society in Dayr al-Balah well before the settlement enterprise got under way in Gaza: the two waves of refugees which had arrived first 1948 and then in 1967, had utterly changed the area's very topography.

The Al-Salah branch is less than two hundred meters from the funeral tent. A branch which cannot escape: two schools, a sports field, a small hospital, offices, large buildings, white and dignified, which everyone in Dayr al-Balah knows. Everyone in

Dayr al-Balah knows these buildings because they have come to signify support, education, health, medicines, gift packages, school bags, exercise books, and clothes. It was no coincidence that Al-Salah's now exhausted coffers provided a monthly source of support for thousands of orphans: Al-Salah is one of the largest charitable organizations in the Gaza Strip. Established in 1978, it obtained a license to operate from the Israeli authorities during the occupation. Among its leadership were 'Abdel Fattah al-Dukhan and Imad al-Faluji: the former was one of Hamas' founders, while the latter was a leader who, until 1995, remained a member of the Islamist movement until his expulsion in 1995.

Al-Salah currently has eight branches across the entire Strip which undertake different support projects, from the poor to the sick, from orphans to students. One of the most important projects for this organization – a force to be reckoned with, within what in Western terms might be called the 'third sector' – is its support for fifteen thousand children, of which most – about four fifths – are orphans. Orphans are, in fact, the principal targets for at least forty charitable organizations in the **West Bank and Gaza**.⁵⁴ Often they have lost a father, they are the children of the *shaheed*, the 'martyrs'. But in Gaza's vocabulary, and indeed beyond it, the word 'martyr' can mean anyone: the militant of either Hamas or one of the other armed factions who has died fighting the Israelis, the militant who has undertaken a suicide attack, someone who died in a workplace accident, or as a result of a bombardment, either as an intended victim or as 'collateral damage'. The other three thousand students in Al-Salah schools, however, come from very poor families. Every child has their own personal file, their personal data are checked against certificates, while the organization's now three decade-long knowledge of the local context avoids the possibility of fraud. The files are then sent on to one of the international organizations which send money from Europe as from Arab states, and through a tried and tested system of long-distance child sponsorship, every child receives a minimum monthly contribution of 100 shekel, equivalent to about thirty dollars. Since 2005, however, receiving money through banks has become increasingly difficult, as foreign accounts have been frozen following the US decision to undertake precautionary measures against Al-Salah in 2003, with Arab banks following suit. Moreover, the checks placed on charitable organizations in Europe which sent funds to Al-Salah have blocked at its roots the flow of funds which had previously been channeled towards Gaza. The result? That the infrastructure of support, the network of assistance to the poor, to students and to orphans has been put under considerable strain. Ever since the summer of 2007 all programs are at risk, from donations to orphans to the distribution of gift packages, from food aid to school supplies.

During Ramadan, Al-Salah used to distribute food packages for poor families, and at Eid al-Fitr, the feast which concludes the month of fasting and which for Muslims is also the feast of important gifts, the association's roughly three hundred volunteers distributed clothes and the money collected through *zakat*. At the beginning of the school year, the association provided school bags, exercise books, pencils, and so on: a small supply of educational equipment handed out to poor students irrespective of the school they attended, whether a private school such as the ones run by Al-Salah itself, a state

⁵⁴ **International Crisis Group**, "Islamic Social Welfare Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory", *ICG Middle East Report*, April 2nd, 2003, p. 7. On Islamic NGOs in the Gaza Strip, see Sara Roy, *Failing Peace. Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict*, op. cit.

school, or indeed one of the schools run by UNRWA, the UN organization charged with assisting Palestinian refugees. For the 2007-2008 school year, Al-Salah provided school uniforms for three thousand students. The organization's large school, inaugurated in 2000, has one thousand students: half in the girls' section, and another five hundred boys in the white building opposite. The buildings are large, simple, well-ventilated, clean and their walls are covered in the children's drawings. The mosque is next door. Nearby, the hospital opened in 2002 and considered the best in town, as well as the best-attended, since the cost of being cured to the patients of being cured is US\$ 1.5 – a charge which is not expected if it is well-known that a family is poor. Seven thousand patients a month are cured by one hundred and twenty doctors and nurses paid for by the organization, which also provides salaries for another forty-eight employees in branches scattered from north to south across the Strip, from Jabalia all the way down to Rafah, as well as around one hundred teachers. The rest are all volunteers. Volunteering has an undeniable religious dimension. From a large, unadorned but clean office block, Salwa, one of Al-Salah's officials, explains: "Most of the doctors, of the nurses, and the staff are well-educated people, who could easily work with organizations, with the government or with the UN. But they decided to work here, precisely because of their religious commitment." After Hamas' victory in the 2006 general elections, and even more so after the June 2007 coup, the situation for Al-Salah has become truly borderline: "It's the hardest it's been in the organization's thirty-year history. We're suffering more now than under the Israeli occupation. The difference is that when the Israelis were here Arab banks did not freeze our assets as they do now. But we are independent. We have no links with politics".⁵⁵ This emphasis on the independence of charities from politics is a constant when one speaks to those in charge of charitable organizations which are believed to be linked if not to Hamas, to other Islamist organizations. Other charities, in Gaza as in the West Bank, offer the same refrain in the attempt to avoid closure, the freezing of their financial assets, and the drying up of their sources of funding: it happened in 2007 and again in 2008, it happened while the Second Intifada was in full flow, and it happened before that during the early days of the Palestinian National Authority, when Yasser Arafat had ordered a few dozen organizations closed. All these measures – at least those undertaken during the 1990s – had not seriously challenged the very existence of these charities. But, alongside analogous measures implemented world-wide after September 11th and the particular strictures imposed upon Islamic charities, the closures of the last few years seem to have had a greater impact on these organizations' ability to survive.

The argument that Islamist charitable organizations have no links with Palestinian politics has never convinced any of these groups' counterparts, neither the higher echelons of the PNA, nor the Israelis, nor US authorities. Indeed, it is in the web of controls established by the US Treasury that the school in Dayr al-Balah was caught, and on August 7th, 2007 Al-Salah was listed amongst the charitable organizations which, according to Washington, financially supported Hamas. To be precise: the US included Al-Salah in the list of organizations under sanction kept by the Office of Foreign Assets Control, with the result that all bank accounts and any financial activity on US soil linked to the organization were frozen, and that US citizens have been prohibited from financing or from having any connection with Al-Salah. This was a decision taken rather late, given that Al-Salah – which is keen to be considered apolitical – was established thirty years

⁵⁵ Author's interview with Salwa, Al-Salah employee, Dayr al-Balah (Gaza), December 6th, 2007.

earlier, with a license given by none other than the occupying power itself, namely Israel. The US Treasury Department argues that “The Al-Salah Society supported Hamas-affiliated combatants during the first Intifada and recruited and indoctrinated youth to support Hamas' activities”.⁵⁶ To justify such a choice, they point to Ahmed al-Kurd's leadership of the organization, where al-Kurd was mayor of Dayr al-Balah in February 2005, when Hamas trounced Fatah in the municipal elections, gaining thirteen out of fifteen seats on the town council. Ahmed al-Kurd is identified as Hamas' leader in Dayr al-Balah in 2003, as well as a member of the Islamist movement's Shura Council during the First Intifada. For his part, Ahmed al-Kurd does not believe that Hamas could have gained support through charitable organizations, which he maintains distributed a negligible percentage of funds compared to the amounts which international donors, for example, brought to Palestinians. As al-Kurd puts it, “Islamic charity organizations didn't pay out [even] 1%”⁵⁷ of the six billion dollars which the international community donated over the past ten years. The US Treasury, however, maintains that “The Al-Salah Society has employed a number of Hamas military wing members. In late 2002, an official of the Al-Salah Society in Gaza was the principal leader of a Hamas military wing structure in the Al-Maghazi refugee camp in Gaza,” where at least a further five people, considered to be members of the same organization⁵⁸, also had links with the charitable organization at the same time.

From this point of view, tracing a red line linking Al-Salah, Ahmed al-Kurd and Hamas appears straightforward enough. Just as it seemed straightforward to Israeli authorities to trace a link between the Islamic Charitable Society of Hebron, Abdel Khaleq al-Natsche, and Hamas. Ever since the time of Amman's control over the West Bank, the Islamic Charitable Society of Hebron has become another colossus of the Islamic charitable sector, so much so that the roots of the *Jamia'a al-Khairiyya al-Islamiyya* can be traced all the way back to 1962, when the Hashemite Kingdom first licensed the charitable organization, opening an orphanage for fifteen children. After that, what followed was a history similar to so many other Muslim charities across the West Bank and Gaza: a history of licenses always renewed, first by Israeli authorities responsible for administering the Occupied Palestinian Territory, then by the PNA, while in the meantime the organization grows, as does the population using its services. Thus, by 2008, the Islamic Charitable Society of Hebron ran eight schools attended by four thousand five hundred students, two orphanages (one male, one female) totaling 240 children resident on the premises, two bakeries, a small textile factory, a central depot with three, forty foot-long industrial refrigerators, and several shops. One day in February 2008, the Israelis closed three schools, the girls' orphanage, they confiscated the stocks in the deposit including the three refrigerators, closed the bakeries, and took away the sowing machines from the workshop located underneath the orphanage. The accusation was that the charity based in Hebron – a city considered to be one of Hamas' strongholds – supported the Islamist organization, so much so that the head of the committee in 2002

⁵⁶ Definition used by the US Treasury Department in “Additional Background Information on Charities Designated Under Executive Order 13224”, available at http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/key-issues/protecting/charities_execorder_13224-a.shtml.

⁵⁷ Kim Murphy, “Hamas Victory Built on Social Work”, *Los Angeles Times*, March 2nd, 2006

⁵⁸ US Treasury Department Press Communiqué available at <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp531.htm>.

was Abdel Khaleq al-Natsche. His was a well-known name in the West Bank, considered to be linked to Hamas' military wing in the West Bank. But he was also among those who subscribed to that famous prisoners' document which, in Spring 2006, attempted to mend the rift between Fatah and Hamas, and to lead the Islamist movement towards the recognition – however qualified – of Israel. Another seven between administrative staff and employees of the charity were imprisoned. The response from the Charitable Society's lawyer was that Abdel Khaleq al-Natsche was not designated from within the organization itself, but appointed by the Ministry of Waqf, that is to say by the PNA itself: "So perhaps they should shut down the Ministry of Waqf"⁵⁹, quips legal consultant Abdel Karim Farrah. The Israeli authorities, however, do not accept this explanation.

Notwithstanding the closure order, the girls' school in one of Hebron's main streets is still open, its classes run normally, with PNA textbooks on the desks just like the textbooks all other students follow in the West Bank as in East Jerusalem as in Gaza. The orphanage where the girls receive meals of chicken and rice is also still open. However, nothing could be done to save the textile factory: the workshop floors are empty, and young Maysoun Darwish is angry: "I'm an orphan, I've been here for fifteen years, since I was only nineteen. They paid me well, one thousand three hundred shekels, just under three hundred and fifty dollars. I can't find another job where they respect you like this, where they give you a good salary and where you work eight hours a day. There are ten of us in the family, and only two of my sisters work".⁶⁰ Maysoun's story is similar to that of so many others across the towns, villages and refugee camps of the West Bank: more than in the PNA's welfare net, the families whose needs are the greatest have found solace in the NGOs which receive support from abroad, and particularly from the extensive network of Islamic charities. Al-Salah in Dayr al-Balah and the *Jamia'a al-Khariyya al-Islamiyya* in Hebron are cases in point, two of dozens of possible examples, glimpses into a hidden but vast world of Muslim – or at times Islamist – organizations. The fact of the matter is that charities operate no distinctions when they offer public services. Every Palestinian knows this. In Gaza city there used to be a small clinic, in the town centre, in a long but narrow road. It belonged to the Society for Public Support, and next to the main entrance, posted on the wall, were the plaques of USAid and the French, who had sent funds in years gone by. Word on the street was that the clinic was supposedly linked to Hamas, and yet it was the single most important centre for childbirth, the one which most people trusted because it was the cleanest and because its doctors were good. All sorts of women went to the small clinic in Al-Mughrabi Road, both secular and Islamist: it had a forty-five thousand-strong catchment area, two hundred and fifty deliveries a month, and three operating theatres.

'Serving the people' is a recurring phrase when meeting members of Hamas, or those people who – albeit without being militants – are close to political Islam. It is the heritage of an experience rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood which gradually evolved over time along increasingly national lines. One 'serves the people' in Egypt, where broadly Islamist voluntary organizations can be found throughout the country, although "they were not political in the narrow sense of the term" because they do not "advocate a

⁵⁹ Author's interview with representatives of the *Jamia'a al-Khariyya al-Islamiyya*, Hebron, May 11th, 2008.

⁶⁰ Author's interview with Maysoun Darwish, Hebron, May 11th, 2008.

particular political agenda or take part in the competition for political power”.⁶¹ One ‘serves the people’ in Palestinian society also, where mosques, schools, clinics, kindergartens, women’s health centers, and sports centers have been one of the hallmarks of the social engagement – and of the spread – of Islamism, particularly since the birth of Ahmed Yassin’s *Mujamma al-Islami* in 1973. As in Egypt, in the Palestinian Territory it has always been simplistic to think of a simple and linear direct connection between charities and politics, between the NGO sector and Hamas, despite the fact that very often one can find Hamas’ leaders, militants and activists within different organizations as teachers, doctors, technicians, or just as volunteers. This is because the social dimension is part and parcel of Hamas’ identity: Article 21 of the *Mithaq* itself states that “part of social welfare consists in helping all those who are in need of material, spiritual or collective co-operation in order to complete various projects”, and that Hamas members must “look after the needs of the people as they would their own needs” and “spare no effort in order to realizing this and protecting them”.⁶²

Despite this, despite the fact that the NGO sector could be considered the base for Hamas’ political mobilization⁶³, charities cannot simultaneously be caged in such a limiting, single framework as the history of the Islamist movement, nor can they be considered to be some kind of ‘piggy bank’ the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* simply draws on at will. This phenomenon is too widespread, it goes well beyond Hamas and the bedrock of its consensus, and well beyond the history of the PNA – beyond even the competition between opposite factions – so much so that it is easy to find within charitable organizations staff and employees with different political affiliations. One only need browse independent studies, such as those published by the World Bank or by the UN, or those published by think tanks to realize that the voluntary sector has over the decades become one of the pillars of Palestinian welfare, without which it would be impossible to provide assistance to the weaker strata of the population. A thin red line connects the Occupied Territory before and after the establishment of the PNA, and this connection is precisely that of the voluntary sector, both secular and religious, which compensated for the shortcomings, the gaping holes in public welfare, health, and education provision. According to a study carried out by the World Bank, the situation evolved from one in which, before the first Oslo Accords, non-governmental organizations covered the costs of 60 percent of primary healthcare and 50 percent of secondary healthcare, to one in which again charities provided for extensive areas of social fabric during the difficult years of the Second Intifada. When conditions for the population become much tougher with the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, the support offered by charitable organizations both in the West Bank and in Gaza becomes absolutely fundamental for many families’ subsistence simply because the number of people in need grows exponentially. According to a study carried out by two UN agencies at the time, “NGOs and charitable organisations (as a whole) are the major service providers, reaching about 60 per cent of the total beneficiaries from regular and emergency program”, thereby overtaking even UNRWA, the UN Agency which has

⁶¹ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam. Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*, Columbia University Press, New York 2002, p. 102.

⁶² Hamas Charter in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit., p. 280.

⁶³ Glenn E. Robinson, “Hamas as Social Movement”, in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004, pp. 126-129.

borne responsibility for Palestinian refugees for sixty years, which accounts for 34 percent of provision, and the PNA's Ministry for Social Affairs, which covers barely 6 percent.⁶⁴ One of the Islamist leaders at the time, Ismail Abu Shanab, was even more precise: in 2002, at the height of the Second Intifada, whether linked to Hamas or otherwise Islamist, charitable organizations covered 15 percent of Palestinians' needs in Gaza.⁶⁵ Nor is the invocation of two such different time periods in recent Palestinian history as the pre-Oslo period and the Second Intifada a coincidence: these are two phases during which "associational life in Gaza and in the West Bank arises in response to the absence of a legitimate national authority, and in conditions of occupation and deprivation".⁶⁶

Islamist associations, therefore, extend the range of their activities if and when the state sector retracts, whether this be the occupying power (Israel) or an entity such as the Palestinian National Authority. In this sense, the West Bank and Gaza are not much different from many other areas of the Arab world with respect to the existence of Islamic charities. One need only cross Gaza's southern border, enter Egypt, and follow the trail of charitable organizations – particularly after the Seventies – to discover that the great increase in voluntary bodies was amongst other things the result of the economic and political conditions in which the most populous Arab state found itself. Particularly after Husni Mubarak's ascent to power and Cairo's application for support in the form of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) guided by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Egypt enters a phase during which charities compensate for a state welfare provision which is no longer able to satisfy the demands of the weaker sections of society, the poorest, the least protected, who make up a very considerable percentage of the population. The diminished presence of the public sector in areas such as health and welfare is therefore counterbalanced by an increase in the efforts made by charitable organizations linked to Muslim activism, which simultaneously also creates a fertile terrain for activism in Islamist opposition – particularly in the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood. This dynamic characterizes not just Egypt, but on the contrary can be detected in many of those Arab countries in which the liberalization policies pursued by international economic institutions during the Eighties and Nineties have caused extremely serious social problems, many of which remain unresolved to date. It is to these problems that Islamic charities have responded promptly. Of course, the Palestinian case has its own unique characteristics, beginning from an economy which in the West Bank and Gaza is based primarily on international assistance, and on the so-called 'aid industry'. By the same token, however, Palestinian Islamist charities have reacted to crises, while so-called 'public' agents have displayed an inability to intervene to support the least protected in society.

Both in the Arab world and in the Palestinian context, health centers, clinics, and free medical centers, however, are only one of the aspects of the Islamist associational sector, albeit perhaps the most high-profile. In reality, this sector has often been the one least closely linked to politics. The one exception in this sense, both in terms of the

⁶⁴ UNESCO OCHA, *Food and Cash Assistance Programs, October 2000-August 2001: A Brief Overview*, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Conal Urquhart, "Hamas uses charity to lure support", *The Observer*, September 1st, 2002, <http://www.observer.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,784146,00.html>.

⁶⁶ Sara Roy, *Failing Peace. Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict*, op. cit., p. 130.

history of the Islamist volunteer sector and in terms of Palestinian civil society more generally, was the 1979 struggle for control of the Red Crescent, which was an important symbol of welfare provision in Gaza. The battle for control of the organization's board of directors took place before the birth of Hamas, but after shaykh Ahmed Yassin's *Mujamma al-Islami* had already become an important actor in the landscape of the Gaza Strip's volunteer sector. Control remained with the Left, but Islamists reacted violently in the roads of Gaza City, ultimately culminating in the affront of an attack on the headquarters of the Red Crescent itself, headquarters which were destroyed and set ablaze. In addition to attacking the Red Crescent itself, its founder, doctor Haidar Abdel Shafi, one of the most important figures of Palestinian history, was also threatened.⁶⁷

It is, in any case, on other sectors which the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* has built its ability to mobilize and irradiate its political message. Schooling, for a start. As demonstrated by the history of the Islamic University, education – from kindergartens to advanced training – was considered one of the pillars of the Islamist presence in Palestine, although mosques remained *the* centre for congregation, unification and education. At a time when the First Intifada was in full flow, Mahmoud A-Zahhar and Eyad Sarraj had a long, intense discussion. The argument – as Sarraj recounts – was the first poll conducted by his centre for mental health on political participation amongst Palestinians. From that study it appeared that 21 percent adhered to other factions, and only 11 percent to Hamas. Eyad Sarraj is a well-known Gaza Strip psychiatrist, as well as secular and independent intellectual. He recalls that “Abu Khaled [this was the name by which many of Gaza's inhabitants knew Mahmoud A-Zahhar] came to me and asked me how I had managed to obtain those results. He contested them in the following way: nearly all of Gaza is Muslim, half of it prays, a quarter prays in a mosque. Therefore that last quarter will meet someone from Hamas”.⁶⁸ Mahmoud A-Zahhar's reasoning might appear simplistic, but it does confirm the importance that the Islamist movement has always given to education – secular as well as religious – as a way of proselytizing. The mosque had been the centre from which the *Mujamma al-Islami* had developed, and continued to play that role after the birth of the operational branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Having said that, as Osama Hamdan himself points out, religion is one thing, while “the efforts of the political movement are not orders that come from God, they are a way of translating” the religious message into political practice.⁶⁹ Everything else, all that is political is the result of efforts made by men.

Nonetheless, the mosque remains central not only as a place within which other activities can take place, from Qur'an reading clubs to activities which in Christian terminology one might call 'Sunday school'. The mosque is also the place to find preachers, imams and a roll call of more or less charismatic leaders with whose presence Hamas' history is imbued with, from shaykh Ahmed Yassin himself to Ismail Haniyeh – who, even as a prime minister, never stopped attending Friday prayers at the mosque, or speaking from the pulpit – to West Bank imams such as Hassan Youssef in Ramallah, Bassam Jarrar, the conservative Hamed Bitawi both in Nablus and at al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and Najef Rajoub in Hebron. These are all religious personalities who also occupy leadership positions within Hamas, and who have, incidentally, also spent at

⁶⁷ Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, op. cit., pp. 106-108.

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Eyad Sarraj, Gaza City, October 28th, 2008.

⁶⁹ Author's interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

times long periods in Israeli jails. Many other less well-known preachers, the so-called ‘countryside imams’, have also spent time in Israeli jails but have remained anonymous in the media until some serious event such as their killing throws light on the role they play within the community.

The most recent case – which in some ways is typical – is that of Majid Barghouthi, who bore a famous family name and was indeed second cousin of Marwan Barghouthi, who is serving time in prison for multiple life sentences. Majid Barghouthi was the imam of a small village, four thousand-strong, on the hills surrounding Ramallah. Hamas’ imam. Because of his political affiliation, he had spent five years in Israeli prisons. But, as Kobar’s inhabitants themselves say, he was well-known amongst the population because for twenty-five years the West Bank’s religious authorities – the Waqf – had sent him far and wide across the countryside to preach. After this, as is typical in Islam as in other religions, he delved into more prosaic concerns, including joining a parents’ association, as he himself was married with eight children (his first bearing the name Qassam). One day in February 2008, the Mukhabarat – Palestinian intelligence services – arrested him believing they could extract from him where Hamas hid its weapons in Kobar. He died during the interrogation. The weapons were not found, but a commission of inquiry into his death was established: it came to a harsh verdict on Palestinian Intelligence, and after a few months Abu Mazen did not confirm its leader, Tawfik al-Tirawi, in post at the end of his mandate. Local leaderships at the forefront, and Hamas and Fatah supporters both bearing the Barghouthi name, the whole village attended the funeral of shaykh Majid, as he was known locally. And then, whether Fatah Barghouthis or Hamas Barghouthis, they all went to give their condolences to the family and the widow, a diminutive woman, pregnant with her ninth child, in their small house on the outskirts of the village – a house like any other, modest, constantly under construction, with the steel rods of its cement pillars in full view, ready to welcome another room, Hamas flags planted on its façade, and the large banner bearing shaykh Ahmed Yassin’s face.

Majid al-Barghouthi’s is a small, local story, one which explains far better than many theories how much Islamist militants – preachers included – are rooted in their communities, and not some kind of external interventions; how Palestinian society displays far stronger bonds than those of mere political affiliation: family ties, clans, local and religious affiliations. Eyad Sarraj, who has worked in Gaza for decades, during which he has known the Islamist movement’s leaderships and militants from the beginning, explains that, from a certain point of view, it is indeed true that Hamas acts according to the typical rules of tribalism: “They have their own, special identity, and they don’t want to be part of the wider group. In this case, identity is a barrier between you and the other”.⁷⁰ This behavior is congruent with the explanation which an activist in Hebron gives of the spirit of Hamas membership: “When you enter the movement, they tell you that you’ll be a part of it until you die, but that you won’t be allowed to die until you have found someone who will ensure continuity. It’s a project.”⁷¹ The combination of these two elements – tribalism and proselytism – is part of the identity of those who become members of Hamas, an identity which is still absolutely similar to that of other movements which have their roots in Hassan al-Banna’s Muslim Brotherhood. This

⁷⁰ Author’s interview with Eyad Sarraj, Gaza City, October 28th, 2008

⁷¹ Author’s interview with an activist, Hebron, February 4th, 2008.

identity is one of the reasons why it is impossible to talk about Hamas without reference to its popular consensus.

Preachers, imams, are part of this consensus, even though they cannot explain it entirely. Moreover, as for all movements which are as pragmatic as the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*, the instruments through which imams preach have modernized, they have evolved over time in order to reach their audience wherever it may be. Just like in other parts of the world, the audience in the Occupied Palestinian Territory often sits in front of the TV. Just like in the rest of the Arab world, where religious satellite channels have markedly increased over recent years, and mirroring trends already witnessed in Italy with Tele Padre Pio, in Europe with Radio Marija, and in the US with Protestant televangelists, Hamas itself has also opened its doors to sermons over the airwaves. Younes Al-Astal, for example, is one of those who addresses the faithful. Born in Khan Younis, graduate of a Saudi university, president of the Shari'a Faculty at the Islamic University in Gaza City, and elected to parliament in 2006 with nearly forty thousand votes, he is one of the most radical figures within the Islamist movement in Gaza City. Al-Astal has always been known for his inflammatory tone, for his radical provocations, and for his hawkish line, one which he never conceals, even in front of the camera.

Of music, film and stereotypes

That Hamas militants do not have close links to the art world is a matter of fact that runs throughout not only the entire history of the Islamic Resistance Movement, but throughout the history of the Muslim Brotherhood. The movement's relationship with culture and entertainment, therefore, is similar to that which other Islamist groups generally display, with the partial exception of Hizbullah. In Hamas' case just as in Hizbullah's, however, absolute statements cannot accurately capture a picture which has evolved over time, becoming increasingly complex, until it began to step back again after Gaza's isolation became complete. The message transmitted to young Islamists, for example, is not monolithic. They are not told that it is prohibited to watch TV, that music is prohibited entirely, or that to adhere to a more orthodox vision of Islam one can list to *nasheed* (Qur'anic chants) alone, or perhaps at best music with percussions alone as base. Reality is much more complex, ranging from those who watch films and TV series without so much as a second thought, all the way to those who keep their televisions turned off, passing through a whole range of intermediate positions which perhaps make little sense to a Westerner. In any case, the stereotype of the Islamist who rejects art, the technological dimension of the artistic message, or who simply rejects technology entirely does not capture the range of realities one finds in Hamas' world.

The clearest demonstration of this is the very decision taken by the movement during the Second Intifada to establish a radio station, the Voice of Al-Aqsa, which quickly became the Gaza Strip's most popular. Then, in 2005, it established a television station which came on air two weeks before the 2006 general elections in which Hamas had decided to take part.⁷² Al-Aqsa TV began its programming on January 8th of that

⁷² Vivian Salama, "Hamas TV: Palestinian Media in Transition", in *Transnational Broadcasting Journal*, n. 16, 2006.

year, without the requisite license – as Ra’ed Abu Deir’s, the station’s director, comments: “We’ve been trying to obtain a license for a year now”. It carried out limited technical tests in Gaza for three months, and survived several attempts to take it off air by the PNA institutions responsible for radio and television, and then, after Hamas’ coup in June 2007, it became the voice of Gaza’s *de facto* government. The decision to establish a television channel is directly linked with the need to provide its own version of the facts and spread its own propaganda, to consolidate a counterweight to both Palestinian public television by providing its audience with a political and cultural imaginary in line with Islamist thought, and to provide a different interpretation of events from that provided by Israeli and (sometimes) by Western channels. After an initial period during which politics and religious education took centre stage, the channel’s programming was broadened to include sport and children’s programs, closely monitored by Israeli observers, who have often accused these programs of inciting hatred and of broadcasting violent and anti-Semitic messages. Hamas’ version is that the objective is not simply that of providing counter-information, it is also – as the channel’s administrators themselves say – to change Hamas’ image, “To change the perspective about us among the world, believing that we are terrorists”.⁷³ Fathi Hammad, the network’s director, who was elected to parliament in 2006, explains: “We will prove to them that we are people under occupation, resisting and struggling to get his rights and not as selfish terrorist people”.⁷⁴

Despite the birth of Al-Aqsa TV, and notwithstanding the fact that the station’s point of reference can be considered Al-Manar – run by Hizbullah, shaykh Hassan Nasrallah’s ‘Party of God’ – the relationship between Hamas and the media has not taken on a strategic significance comparable to that of the Shi’ite Islamist movement in Lebanon. Or at least, it did not for many years, until a turn of events which is all in all rather recent, dating back to the beginning of the century, when Hamas decided to adopt a full-blown media strategy which went beyond the press, the diffusion of which was after all rather limited. This strategy involved radio stations in Gaza, and then the movement towards television, first through the establishment of Al-Aqsa TV between 2005 and 2006, then with the Lebanese-based Quds TV. It also involved the development of several websites gathering the information conveyed by the Palestinian Islamist movement. If one cannot speak of a full-blown communications strategy during Hamas’ early years, at certain points of its existence the Islamist movement certainly demonstrated an ability to take surprisingly effective advantage of the media landscape.

One example stands out above others, demonstrating just how much Hamas had already in the early 1990s understood the role of communications in the attempt to build a relationship with the outside world which went beyond the purely bipolar “Israelis vs. Palestinians” dimension. This is the Marj al-Zuhour case, when on 17 December 1992 four hundred and fifteen Islamists, affiliated mostly with Hamas but also members of the Islamic Jihad, were arrested in the West Bank and in Gaza by Israeli authorities and then deported to southern Lebanon. Very quickly, the Marj al-Zuhour militants took a decision: they would remain in the open countryside, in harsh weather conditions (it was winter, and shelter was inadequate to protect them all from the cold). The qualitative difference in this episode lay in the media coverage of the struggle with the Israelis,

⁷³ US National Public Radio interview with Fathi Hammad February 3rd, 2006, available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=5186883>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

which immediately established a fully-fledged press centre, identifying those who would have liaised with the international journalists which within months were flocking to Marj al-Zuhour. Aside from the designation of Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi as spokesperson, Hamas representatives adopted a media strategy they had followed in the organization of the camp itself: they decided to manage Marj al-Zuhour as though it were a *non-temporary* camp, assigning roles on the basis of each individual's competence, adapting a camp set up in a few short days to the landscape surrounding it. In their relationship with the media, this meant selecting spokespeople to liaise with the international press based on a criterion as simple as it was effective: linguistic competence. Nor was it difficult to come by men who were familiar with several foreign languages, as many of those who would later become Hamas' cadres had pursued further education abroad. Four were in possession of doctorates, ten had masters degrees, sixty-nine had undergraduate degrees, five were journalists, eleven were doctors, fourteen were engineers. For some, the level linguistic competence was aided by their experience as journalists in Lebanon before being arrested and deported to Lebanon. The deportation to Marj al-Zuhour was constantly placed in the spotlight, both in the Arabic media and in the international press, so much so that it became a media boomerang for the Israelis, and for Hamas – as Rantisi himself would later say – “it was a milestone. After that event, Hamas became an actor on the international stage.”

However, it is the continuous presence of Hamas leaders on the television screens that changes the relationship between TV and Palestinian Islamists. This presence became continuous with the birth of a 24-hour Arabic news channel, which itself affords new perspectives, new ways of understanding events, and for its competitors meant dealing with new criteria of newsworthiness. The entry onto the media scene of Al-Jazeera towards the end of the Nineties, its coverage of Palestinian politics – particularly since the Second Intifada – change Hamas' relationship to television as well. Information channels are finally completely legitimized, not only in the eyes of the leadership who, thanks to press conferences and interviews, come into direct contact with the media, but also among that great majority of militants who can now easily turn on the TV and zap from one satellite channel to another. Using television as a source of information becomes a normal, daily act, along the lines of what is already happening for other Islamist movements in other Arab countries.

But what happens when one moves from information to other programming, what happens in the shift from news to entertainment? It is precisely on the terrain of general television programming that the fissures between the more open and orthodox sectors within Hamas become apparent. This distinction does not exclude any *place* Hamas is present in, from geographical areas such as the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and including even the Israelis prisons within which thousands of Islamists are detained. In jails, for example, because the rules of daily routines vary quite considerably between the secular members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Islamic Jihad's militants, prisoners tend to be grouped by political affiliation in order to satisfy a number of requirements: firstly, to avoid creating friction within individual cells between members of different factions, and secondly simply to make cohabitation easier. One of the rules is aimed precisely at the presence and watching of television. There is general agreement that there should be no 'variety' shows – much less programming which might be considered 'indecent' by more

rigid Islamist groups – but the debate hots up when it comes to fiction. In the Arab world, fiction covers a great spectrum of possibilities, from American action films which swamp Saudi satellite channels, to historical dramas produced predominantly in Syria, from Egyptian comedies of the last twenty years to dramas shot in Cairo or in the Delta countryside.

It is here, between cinema and TV, that one can trace the line dividing the more radical factions of Hamas from those within the movement who are considered more pragmatic, or even moderate. Certainly, it is easier to discover such divisions this way, than it is through those gestures through which one understands whether an Egyptian or a Tunisian Islamist or one in the European diaspora is more or less open in his mores – when, for example, they might be ready to shake a woman’s hand to greet her, or perhaps with mild embarrassment avoids the handshake and places his hand on his chest as a sign of respect. The overwhelming majority of Hamas’ leadership will not shake hands with a woman who is not wearing a glove. Rather, it is the celluloid world which opens windows onto the mysterious world of Hamas. Nearly everyone watches TV, even those considered the most conservative, and some amongst the Islamist leadership have very specific cinematic preferences. There are those who love films dealing with current events, such as Osama Hamdan, while others, like Ahmed Youssef, who once lived in the United States, prefer old American films. There are even those who are fanatical about Italian neorealist cinema, such as Mahmoud al-Ramahi, anesthetist, graduate of an Italian medical school, and one of the deputies elected in 2006 and then incarcerated by Israel until 2009. Many amongst the leadership do what most Arab Muslims do during Ramadan: they avidly follow the plot of *Bab al-Hara*, a soap opera set in a fictitious old quarter in Damascus during the golden age of anti-colonialist nationalism. Many among the middle-aged cadres, therefore, share the same preferences as those in the wider Arab world who are either not militants, or simply not Islamists. Following *Bab al-Hara* is a bit like listening to the legends of Middle Eastern music: the old and always fascinating Lebanese legend Fayrouz for those who live further north, between the West Bank and the Levant; or Umm Kulthoum, the Star of the Orient, the legend of Pan-Arabism, the voice of Egypt, for those who, living in Gaza, gravitate further towards Cairo’s cultural orbit.

Hijab and politics

“Hamas is now made up of more women than men.”⁷⁵ One wonders whether shaykh Hamed Bitawi’s statement is based on statistical evidence or on the experience of one of the Islamist movement’s doyens, president of the Union of Palestinian Ulama and professor at Al-Najah University, although perhaps best-known outside the West Bank and Gaza as one of Hamas’ most conservative clerics. That there are many women within Hamas is an objective fact, visible in the movement’s mass demonstrations. Six were even returned to Parliament in the January 25th, 2006, elections for the Palestinian Parliament, although in that case there were reserved quotas to facilitate a female participation which Hamas in no way discouraged when it came to making its voice heard on the electoral law to be adopted. Hamas is well aware that can rely on an enormous

⁷⁵ Author’s interview with Hamed Bitawi, Nablus, November 2nd, 2008.

slice of the female vote, which is perhaps most conservative, most tied to a traditional way of life, women's role within it, and the family. However, even a cursory examination of the behavior of politically active women within Hamas shows how different and complex it is today from the time of the movement's establishment. Throughout the Eighties, the pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood first, and then later from the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* upon social mores and upon the socio-religious code of conduct was very intense. Conservative pressures on women in particular dates to this period, with women attending university, for example, pressured into adopting a more sober and increasingly modest dress code, especially in conjunction with the First Intifada. The justification was: Palestine is in mourning, there is a struggle against the occupation, and therefore one cannot have fun, nor betray vanity for one's body or one's clothes, nor – for example – use make-up. It was as though every Palestinian should demonstrate their mourning, which in the Arab-Islamic tradition, just like in many places in the Western world means demonstrating with one's own body the pain of loss: overgrown beards, the lack of make-up, modest dress, dark colors or black.

This is the moment, during 1988, at which the first hijab campaign bursts onto the political scene: a campaign begun by Hamas, but a campaign which is not met with opposition by the secular and nationalist factions which had also merged into the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) guiding the Intifada. In Gaza particularly, women who do not don the veil are threatened, even targeted with stones, until during the summer of 1989, the Unified National Leadership itself intervened to try to take the question of *hijab* off the agenda of the Revolt of the Stones: too late, as many of Gaza's women said at the time⁷⁶, even though in any case the UNLU's intervention helped abruptly close the vicious circle thanks to which the *hijab* was rapidly becoming a token of religious conformism under the guise of nationalist symbol. The end of the violent *hijab* campaign of 1988-89, however, is unable to stop the progressive drift towards a conservative code of both dress and social behavior, particularly in areas such as Gaza but also in the Southern West Bank, which were already quite traditional. This is what in the West is called 'Islamization' of Arab societies, and – again in many Western eyes – it is uniquely linked to the exponential growth of Islam since the Seventies. In Palestine, the problem is that this so-called 'Islamization' traverses all political forces, even those which are defined simply – and simplistically – as secular, nationalist or leftist. It would therefore be better to talk about the diffusion of socio-religious *mores* which turns towards tradition, or at least one which moves closer to a more orthodox understanding of faith, shared by Hamas and Fatah, by town and country, by Hebron in the South and by the sophistication of Nablus.

Thus, a considerable proportion of women in the West Bank and Gaza today dons the veil, just as they do throughout the Arab world. Fatah's women wear it, Hamas' women wear it, and women who recognize themselves in no particular political faction wear it. Having said that, it is also beyond doubt that this dress code is used to express one's ideas with immediacy, publicly and visibly. This is also why Hamas women use it. It is a code which makes modesty its first rule, a rule with respect to which all else falls into second place. The symbol of this code is the *jilbab*, the long coat-like gown which

⁷⁶ Reema Hammami, "From Immodesty to Collaboration: Hamas, the Women's Movement, and National Identity in the Intifada", in Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (eds.) *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report*, IB Tauris, London-New York, 1997, pp. 194-210.

covers women down to their feet in dull colors which is particularly popular amongst girls. However, Omar Barghouthi, a Palestinian choreographer and careful observer of popular culture, argues that this aesthetic code, however, is considered in contradiction with “that distinctive national element which pertains to Hamas”. He maintains that the *jilbab* has nothing to do with Palestinian tradition. And yet, it is worn especially by those women and girls who wish to demonstrate their allegiance to the Islamist message. “It’s a uniform, it’s monolithic, and it is definitely imported”, Barghouthi says, recalling instead how different traditional Palestinian dress was, the exact opposite of a uniform, adding: “Every woman was unique, because it was she who decided the design and style of the embroidery she sewed onto her dress”.⁷⁷ Clashing against this monolithic image of Hamas female side – women in uniform and therefore uniformed – rendering it more complex or at least more varied, are single individuals, indeed, individual women, particularly the youngest. Some of the Hamas leadership’s daughters are far from both aesthetic and psychological stereotypes. It is possible, for example, to meet girls in jeans with flowery tops, a matching foulard covering their hair, who have no compunction about voicing very different ideas from those of their fathers, present at the conversation. This also goes for more conservative leaders, whose daughters might wear the *jilbab* and an even simpler veil across the face. In both cases, the girls do not appear submissive, completely dominated by their fathers, but on the contrary they came across as young women with very sharp eyes, careful listeners, with no sense of inferiority in relation to the guest, whether Palestinian or foreign.

Another feature of the Western stereotype of Islamist women is the recurring theme of Muslim polygamy, often splashed across newspapers, but never tackled asking those concerned what they think about polygamy. In the Palestinian context, polygamy is a highly restricted practice, both in terms of numbers and in terms of traditions. It is likewise, therefore, restricted in Hamas’ universe. When tackling the question with the movements members, once a first blush of embarrassment has been overcome, one discovers that most men have only one wife, perhaps with lots of children, and that the last case of polygamy in the family dates back a few generations. If anything, one detects in their unfolding story a certain complicity within the couple, a complicity which comes from the feeling of being a tribe, a group apart, clandestine in many moments of their lives – as though political choices had to be made together if the couple were to continue together for years. In a sense, a political project becomes a family project. It is just one example amongst many, but Sayyed Abu Musameh and his wife confirm that they met when both were active members in the Muslim Brotherhood. Nor is it difficult to find women who have shared their husbands’ political project to the point of inheriting their political roles. In Palestinian politics this happened within Fatah as well, as in the classic case of Umm Jihad, the widow of one of the movement’s historical leaders, Khalil al-Wazir also known as Abu Jihad, assassinated by what is thought to have been a Mossad commando unit in 1988. There are several similar instances within Hamas, from the case of Mona Mansour – widow of Jamal, one of the West Bank’s best-known leaders killed by the Israelis in a targeted assassination in 2001, and returned to parliament in the general elections of 2006 – to the shocking case of Maryam Farhat, better known as Umm Nidal, also elected as member of parliament, who in 2002 appeared at her son’s side in the video in which he claimed responsibility for the attack on the Atzoma

⁷⁷ Author’s interview with Omar Barghouthi, Ramallah, October 15th, 2008.

settlement, in the Gaza Strip, in which the young man died after having killed five people: Umm Nidal had had two other sons killed in the Al-Aqsa Intifada, and had publicly declared that had she had one hundred sons, she would have wanted them all to be ‘martyrs’, thereby becoming a kind of symbol of Hamas’ ‘martyrology’ within the Strip.

At any rate, there are examples of polygamy within Hamas. One militant, who is himself monogamous, in love with his wife and who would like her to complete her studies soon after years of looking after their six children, is surprised at curiosity on such matters, saying: “It is possible to have up to four wives, but it certainly isn’t compulsory”. However, the question which arises to a Western observer is how this choice is perceived by a woman, who finds herself having to share a man with someone else. A Hamas militant who has been willing to tell me about her polygamous life is surprising: it is not defensive, on the contrary. ‘A.’ says, “If you don’t have a problem talking about it frankly, I’ll explain it to you.” Showing how the world can be read from a completely different perspective, she says: “First of all, for us it is difficult to understand your lack of solidarity, the indifference of Western women towards other women who are lovers, or prostitutes, women with no protection, with no defense. You prefer that your husband have a lover, without that woman having any rights at all?” Then she changes her tone: “If you want to know whether I suffered when, after twenty years of marriage and of love, my husband told me that he wanted to take another wife, I will answer that yes I did. I suffered a lot, and I immediately rejected the idea, telling him I did not agree.” She is an intelligent woman, strong, not at all submissive: A. shows she did not give in, initially, and on the contrary that she had – at that point – a say in a decision which involved the entire family, her six children included. She adds: “I thought about it again and again, and then – in the end – I understood one thing: had I not allowed him to take another wife, I would have lost him. So then I said yes. He took a wife who was much younger than I was, practically the same age as my eldest son. Now, when he is with me, I know he is mine alone, completely mine.”⁷⁸ A. has no hesitation: she knows she means a lot to her husband. But her story is that of a woman who has had to square with a choice she did not want, and it is also the story of a very strong person, who for that reason did not passively submit to polygamy, but met it head on the way one does other events in the life of a couple, even (in fact, frequently) in the West, such as a lover, an illegitimate child, or a divorce.

To Western eyes, this might appear paradoxical, but A.’s insistence on the matter of women’s rights is central to Hamas’ female militants who have decided to take an active part in politics. And it is precisely to Islam’s scriptures that Hamas’ most prominent exponents trace their struggle in defense of women’s rights, in line with an Islamist Feminism which has developed over recent years not only – indeed, not primarily – in the Arabic-speaking world, but rather in Asian Islam and within Muslim communities living in the West. Samira Halaika, one of the six women returned on January 25th 2006 in the Change and Reform list connected to Hamas, points out with ill-concealed irony that “In the Qur’an there is a *Sura al-Nisa*, a sura on women, but there is no *Sura al-Rijal*, a sura devoted to men”. She adds: “The Qur’an already contains indications of all women’s rights, first and foremost equality. Because no one is superior to anyone else, in the relation between men and women. And there is not a single word in

⁷⁸ Author’s interview with A., Hamas militant, West Bank, March 2008.

the Qur'an prohibiting women from working or from taking part in politics".⁷⁹ Taking part in politics as Samira Halaika herself does, whose husband and eldest son were at certain times arrested with the accusation of belonging to Hamas, and for whom political engagement also means supporting the men, who are, as she says, "the first to be struck by the occupation". Women, she says, "cannot sit back and watch without doing anything, they must plug the leaks, since in society it is men who pay the price first. Women have many duties: taking care of the children of the house, of the family, living up to their duties in politics, and fulfill their duties towards society".

While Samira Halaika thinks about a role rooted in the contingencies of place and time, Maryam Saleh, on the other hand, is the typical representative of Islamist feminism, starting from her CV entirely devoted to studying sacred texts, with a doctorate earned in Saudi Arabia and a lectureship at Al-Quds University. Like many of her lawyer and Islamologist colleagues in other Arab countries, Maryam Saleh begins from an interpretation of the sacred scriptures in order to talk about women's rights – from an Islamist perspective, of course. Born in 1952 in a West Bank refugee camp, it is no coincidence that in March 2006 Ismail Haniyeh put her in charge of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the first Hamas government. According to Islah Jad, one of the most important Palestinian gender studies scholars, the paradoxical conclusion is that it is precisely "in the process of formulating a new reading of religious text that a parallel process of *deislamization* of women's rights has begun" within Hamas.⁸⁰ What does this mean? It means that the interpretation of sacred texts from a female perspective has given Hamas women a legitimacy which they otherwise would not have had, and has driven them to demand more: real equality in politics – something which has not yet occurred. And yet, two events have shed a little light onto the least well-known part of Hamas' history: first, the female vote in the general elections of January 25th, 2006, which was probably decisive for the Islamist movement's victory, and secondly, the small platoon of women deputies who arrived in Parliament, who allowed women to carve out for themselves a role that more conservative sectors of Hamas would not have wanted.

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Samira Halaika, Hebron, February 4th, 2008.

⁸⁰ Islah Jad, "Between Religion and Secularism: Islamist Women of Hamas", in Fereshteh Nourai-Simone (ed.) *On Shifting Ground. Muslim Women in the Global Era*, The Feminist Press, New York 2005, p. 185.

Chapter 3: Consolidation

“The Charter is not the Qur’an”

The story goes that in March of 1988, that is while the Intifada was in full flow, one of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood’s leaders sent a message to shaykh Yassin which was not at all reassuring for those who had established the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* barely three months earlier. It was the messenger himself, who wishes to remain anonymous, who specifies the content of the message: “Tell Yassin it’s too much, we can’t afford it”. The Jordanian Ikhwan, in other words, was not able to maintain Hamas from a financial point of view, on top of which perhaps pressure in Amman was mounting to avoid the Ikhwan from openly supporting one of the leading actors in the Uprising of the Stones. Yassin’s reply was perfectly in line with the spirit of any movement which sees itself as revolutionary: “We, however, will keep going. Tell the Ikhwan in Amman that if they are unable to maintain us from a financial point of view, to at least recite the *du’a*, the supplication to God. We will keep going regardless”.⁸¹

Hamas’ organizational and political machine was running and could not be stopped. In February, well before the Jordanian Ikhwan attempted to rein in the operational branch of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas had to all intents and purposes become one of the protagonists of the Revolt of the Stones. The Hamas acronym, whose consonants correspond to the initials of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*, appears for the first time on February 11th, 1988, at the foot of a flier, along with a claim for responsibility which could no longer be put off: Hamas, “the powerful arm of the Association of Muslim Brothers”. Thus, it is with what scholars call the First Intifada’s ‘fourth communiqué’ that Hamas, with its own strategy, fully enters the fray of the Revolt of the Stones. The Islamic Resistance Movement establishes its own timetable for protests, its own collections for the victims of the uprising, and begins to hold alternative classes in mosques, allowing students to continue their studies during the period of strikes in universities and in secondary schools. Hamas is going through a phase in which it must reinforce its identity, it must advertise it while still maintaining a relationship of non-belligerence, so to speak, with the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising, the UNLU, which included all the other secular and nationalist movements.⁸² However, the honeymoon phase in relations between secular groups and Hamas is over even before the end of spring, when the Islamist Resistance Movement starts seeing itself as an alternative to the Unified Command. Whereas beforehand, for example, attempts were made to not get in each other’s way in calling for strikes or demonstrations, the swelling of Hamas’ ranks leads it to compete rather than co-operate. To the point of clashing.

Making relations between Hamas and the Unified Command worse – the UNLU itself was explicitly linked to the PLO, after an initial period in which the leadership

⁸¹ Interview with an anonymous source, November 2008.

⁸² Jean-François Legrain, “The Islamic Movement and the Intifada”, in *Intifada*, op. cit., p. 182.

abroad was itself ignorant of what was going on in the West Bank and Gaza – were Yasser Arafat’s choice of first diplomatic openings. Abu Ammar, Arafat’s *nom de guerre*, was rapidly changing strategy on the Palestinian question, riding the impetuous wave of the Intifada in order to achieve the status of sole Palestinian interlocutor to the international community: so much so that it is precisely in June 1988, during a meeting of Arab states convened specifically in order to deal with what was happening in the West Bank and Gaza – a meeting set up by Bassam Abu Sharif, then one of Arafat’s most trusted advisors – that the ‘two-state solution’, one Israeli the other Palestinian, is accepted for the first time in the guise of acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22nd, 1967. The news of this turning point reaches the streets in the Occupied Palestinian Territory just as it reaches the eyes and ears of the rest of the world. It therefore appears to be no mere coincidence that, during the very weeks in which Arafat was assembling his new strategy, Hamas decided to emphasize its role as an alternative not just to other factions in the West Bank and in Gaza, but to the PLO itself. On August 18th, Hamas publishes its Charter, the *Mithaq*, its most debated, cited, and condemned document, and one which was often used as a political bargaining tool. Article 13 expressly states that “the initiatives, what is called a ‘peaceful solution’ and ‘international conferences’ to resolve the Palestinian problem, are contrary to the ideology of the Islamic Resistance Movement, because giving up any part of Palestine is like giving up part of religion. The nationalism of the Islamic Resistance Movement is part of its religion; it educates its members on this, and they perform jihad to raise the banner of God over their nation”.⁸³ Barely three months pass from the distribution of this document that Arafat receives the mandate required to negotiate for the birth of a Palestinian state in `the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital: the declaration of independence past on November 15th by the Palestinian National Council in session in Algiers. The road to Oslo had been opened, but Hamas had already decided not to travel it.

According to the most credible account, it is Abdel Fattah al-Dukhan who penned the text of Hamas’ Charter, one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood’s older generation in Gaza, among those present at the December 9th, 1987 meeting at shaykh Ahmed Yassin’s house. Nearly the same age as Yassin, and a refugee from the Ashkelon area, Dukhan was also the headmaster of the school in the Nuseyrat refugee camp until he was elected to Parliament in a Hamas list in 2006 as the Assembly’s eldest member. It was therefore neither one of the new leadership’s ideologues, nor one of the future leaders of the diaspora who wrote the *Mithaq*. The hand which wrote the foundational Charter belonged to a teacher of fifty years, a preacher from one of Gaza’s refugee camps, who produced a militant text, which over the years became a political manifesto which Hamas itself never debated. It’s an extremely long text, in which several different levels coexist, from the typical language of intifada propaganda leaflets, to the statements about current political events, from pedagogical messages to the most retrograde of stereotypes, including the citation of the infamously anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Comprising thirty-six articles, crammed with religious citations, particularly passages from the Qur’an but also hadith, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and quotations from poets and sages. The *Mithaq* is a text replete with slogans and long

⁸³ Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, cit., *Hamas Charter*, p.274.

didactic explanations rooted in Islam's early history and the later victories of its great leaders, including Salahuddin al-Ayyubi, the Saladin who defeated the Crusaders.

Of the destruction of Israel, the Charter speaks in the preamble, but not by means of a discussion, but rather through one of the three citations which appear at the beginning of the text. It is a citation taken from Hassan al-Banna who in 1948 said "Israel will grow and will remain strong until Islam will eliminate it, just as it eliminated what came before it". Paradoxically, however, it is not so much the words of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood which create a nearly insurmountable obstacle to changing the *Mithaq*, as much as Article 11, which defines Palestine as an Islamic *waqf*, and therefore a land which cannot be subject to the disposal of men, but rather an Islamic land entrusted to the Muslim generations until the Judgement Day." Thus, adds the Charter's author, "no one may renounce all, or even part of it"⁸⁴. According to sources inside Hamas, it is on this article that internal debate has focused in order to try to allow what is after all a pragmatic organization to move beyond the formal impasse which has bogged the movement down in recent years. Hamas' *Mithaq*, after all, simply echoes what had already been said in a nationalist vein in the Palestinian National Charter, approved by the Palestinian National Congress on July 11th, 1968, according to which: "The liberation of Palestine, from an Arab viewpoint, is a national duty [...] and aims to the elimination of Zionism in Palestine". Eliminating that phrase, just like the other anti-Zionist elements in the *Palestinian National Charter*, was not the *sine qua non* condition for the negotiations between the PLO and Israel which lead to the Oslo Accords. In practice the question of its elimination was tackled only in 1996, after the Palestinian National Authority had already been established, and even then it was left formally unresolved.⁸⁵

The history of the Palestinian National Charter has been taken as an example by many Hamas leaders to argue that the *Mithaq* itself has been used by Western governments as an alibi and by Israel to avoid contacts with the Islamist Movement, especially after the decision to take part in electoral politics in 2005. Indeed, among the conditions imposed by the International Quartet (comprising UN, EU, US, and Russia) after the formation of the first Hamas government in the spring of 2006, there was also a requirement that Haniyeh's executive accept the agreements stipulated by the PLO and renounce those parts of its founding Charter which called for the elimination of Israel. For the Islamist leadership, however, to recant even parts of the *Mithaq* meant recognizing Israel without having obtained a reciprocal legitimization, and according to many among that same leadership an equally formal recognition not only of the Palestinian people, but of Palestinians as a nation. From a strictly political point of view, Hamas has always feared repeating the mistakes made by Fatah and by the PLO by giving away too much to Israel without receiving anything in exchange. On the contrary, both during the years of the negotiations between the 1991 Madrid Conference and the Camp David agreement, and then later during the life of the Palestinian National Authority, Hamas has opposed the stances of the PLO and of the Authority which were

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.273.

⁸⁵ Yasser Arafat announced the changes to the National Charter to the then US President Bill Clinton in a letter sent from Nablus on January 13th, 1998, which confirms that the extraordinary session of the Palestinian National Council of April 1996 had already undertaken the appropriate changes to those parts of the Charter which were not in line with UN Security Council Resolutions and with the Oslo Agreements. Formally, however, the changes would be made only in 1998.

considered lax. According to Islamist leaders, a more flexible negotiating stance would have led to a significant concession without substantial and tangible results.

The conclusion drawn by several Hamas leaders, however, is that the Charter's significance has in actual fact been over-estimated by those who call for its disavowal, given that Hamas' founding charter has mostly been set aside, replaced over the decades by other documents which are far more important in defining the strategy and politics of the Islamist movement. There are even those who question the idea of the 1988 document as a founding charter. As Nasser al-Din al-Sha'er, a moderate Islamist from Nablus, puts it, "three people sat around a table and wrote it" – a trenchant definition liquidating any further reflection on the *Mithaq*. There is one important exception, the single element which is truly controversial and which has prevented Hamas from modifying its Charter throughout its first two decades, namely the definition of Palestine as a *waqf*, land belonging to the Muslim community as a whole. "I don't think that's true", Nasser al-Din Sha'er retorts: "Palestine cannot be considered a *waqf*, and I wrote about it in 1997".⁸⁶

Nonetheless, Hamas' first document, the one on which the Islamist movement did not even open a discussion concerning either its wording or its substance, the only document rooted – at least in its drafting – to the here and now of the Revolt of the Stones, has in practice become its most debated and most cited document outside the movement itself. Indeed, often it was the only to have been translated from Arabic and used in high-level negotiations and meetings between governments, the only object of negotiations. It is particularly the point relating to the existence of Israel which has monopolized the debate on Hamas. For its part, the organization has never denied that document, but over the years this point became the true obstacle to any opening towards the Palestinian Islamist movement, so much so that Azzam Tamimi, historian and author of one of the most in-depth studies of the movement, says that the Charter was "Hamas' worst enemy".⁸⁷ According to Tamimi, this assessment is shared by Khaled Meshaal himself, who has reportedly said that the Charter was written "by mistake" – a recognition made in private conversations by the leadership itself, albeit not in public. There are those who maintain that no one, within Hamas, can recall the Charter, nor could they cite from memory its main points, and that if anything it is better known to the movement's opponents than it is to the members of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*. Others recall the way in which the Charter came to life, who wrote it, the historical moment, the goals, giving such contextualization a crucial weight for the very contents of the document. Again according to Tamimi, since the middle of the Nineties what Hamas has said in public has contradicted the *Mithaq* itself.

Having said that, within Hamas' leadership, no one is prepared to disavow the 1988 Charter. But the embarrassment is obvious. In this as in other cases, the movement sacrifices its pragmatic side on the altar of its unity, because it considers essential for its solidity that its unique democratic centralism not be undermined. Abandoning the Charter would not be possible even for those who opposed it from the very beginning unless an extensive discussion took place including all Hamas' different groupings, all four of its *constituencies*, namely its bureau abroad, Gaza, the West Bank, and the militants detained within Israeli prisons. This is an example of what Mahmoud A-Zahhar defines a "collective decision", one taken within a single constituency and then by the four groups

⁸⁶ Author's interview with Nasser al-Din al-Sha'er, Nablus, November, 2nd, 2008.

⁸⁷ Author's interview with Azzam Tamimi, London, July, 12th, 2008.

as a whole, “but only having listened to what each group has to say on the matter at hand”. But once the collective decision has been taken, “everyone is committed to abiding by it, irrespective of their own positions.”⁸⁸ Only in this case, after, that is, a decision taken by a majority, could Hamas formally change its position on the Charter, which is currently being defended by those who do not agree with it as well as those who do. Among the leadership who have been heard over recent years, the only one to have admitted his opposition to the *Mithaq* is Sayyed Abu Musameh, who in October 2008 revealed that both he and Moussa Abu Marzouq – one of the Islamist movement’s most important figures – had come out against the document.⁸⁹ Confirming Abu Musameh’s declaration, is a statement made by Abu Marzouq dating to the period after the June 2007 *coup* in Gaza during which Hamas was trying to break an even greater international isolation than the one it experienced after its success in the January 2006 general elections. Abu Marzouq wrote a comment on the *Los Angeles Times* of July 10th, 2007, in his position as Number 2 of Hamas’ political Office, in which he stated that the Charter made public in August 1988 has had its time, indeed, it must be understood in its historical context. The time it was written in made it “an essentially revolutionary document, born of the intolerable conditions under occupation more than twenty years ago”.⁹⁰ Abu Marzouq goes further, making parallels between the Hamas manifesto and other ‘founding revolutionary documents’ such as the American Declaration of Independence, which “simply did not countenance (at least, not in the minds of most of its illustrious signatories) any such status for the 700,000 African slaves at that time”, or the basic law on the basis of which Israel “declares itself explicitly to be a state for the Jews, conferring privileged status based on faith in a land where millions of occupants are Arabs, Muslims and Christians”.⁹¹ No *Sonderweg*, therefore, no special path for Hamas which, on the contrary, according to Abu Marzouq, who is considered the *eminence grise* of the expatriate centre, mirrors the experiences of other revolutionary movements. However, in Abu Marzouq’s accusation, it is only to the Islamist Palestinian movement that the double standard of the international community is applied, namely reject the statements now “as a necessary precondition for any discourse whatsoever”.⁹²

In truth, the first public statements which attempted to put the value of the Charter into its proper perspective appeared already during an earlier period, between 2003 and 2005, when Hamas was discussing the possibility of what became its electoral turn. The first substantive public qualifications with respect to the Charter began to appear towards the end of the Second Intifada, when the idea of entering the PNA and a reformed PLO was beginning to win supporters. The list of such statements is long, the most important of which are concentrated in the West Bank, and particularly in the politically important center of Nablus. The most effective from the media point of view was made in September 2005 to the Reuters news agency by Muhammad Ghazzal, head of the Civil Engineering Department of Al-Najah University. The Charter of 1988, he says “is not the Qur’an”: “On the level of history”, Ghazzal clarifies, “we consider all Palestinian

⁸⁸ Author’s interview with Mahmoud A-Zahhar, Gaza City, December, 6th, 2007

⁸⁹ Author’s interview with Sayyed Abu Musameh, Gaza City, October, 26th, 2008

⁹⁰ Moussa Abu Marzouq, “Hamas’ stand” in *Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 2007; available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-marzook10jul10,0,777568.story?coll=la-news-comment-opinions>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

territories the property of the Palestinians, but now we are talking about the reality, about a political solution. Reality is something different.”⁹³ Even shaykh Hamed Bitawi, a religious authority in Nablus and president of the Union of Palestinian Ulama known for his radical positions, had no problem in confirming that “the Charter is not the Qur’an, we can change it. It is merely the summary of the Islamist Movement’s positions in its relation to other factions, and of its politics”.⁹⁴ Aziz Dweik, founder of the Geography Department at Nablus University who then became Speaker of the Palestinian Assembly after the 2006 general elections but prisoner in an Israeli jail since summer of that year and until 2009, goes even further, clarifying the political and pragmatic necessity to move away from the 1988 *Mithaq*. Speaking with Khaled Amayreh, a Palestinian journalist close to Islamist positions, he had said that “ Hamas will not allow itself to be held hostage by rhetorical slogans of the past such as the one on the ‘destruction of Israel’ ”.⁹⁵

Ever since 2005, Hamas’ leadership has attempted to move beyond the 1988 Charter without disavowing it, but rather by producing documents and position statements which might be used to distance the movement from its founding document, without entirely rejecting it. It has to be said that this attempt has not produced the desired effects, despite the fact that all the main figures in the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* have used more than one instrument – including the mass media – in the attempt to open a channel not so much towards Israel, but towards Western states, and the United States above all. Ahmed Youssef, one of Ismail Haniyeh’s closest s at least up until June 2007, has often called attention to the fact that the Charter has been in practice need superseded by other official documents.⁹⁶ Of these, a prime example is provided by the electoral manifesto of the Change and Reform list, under the banner of which Hamas took part in the general elections of January 2006. Indeed, the manifesto takes the form of a document which goes well beyond the requirements of an electoral campaign outlining the movement’s policies. It is also a completely different document from its 1988 counterpart because it is not written in a hurry, and it is not the carrier of what was felt to be a revolutionary moment – the Intifada – but is rather the indicator of discussions conducted (nearly always in secret) by Hamas both within and outside the Occupied Territory. This complexity is such that it leads figures like Osama Hamdan⁹⁷ and Mahmoud A-Zahhar⁹⁸ himself define it as the most important public document since the 1988 Charter. Given the difficulty in breaking the movement’s international isolation, and given the impossibility of formally renouncing the Charter without an internal debate, the corpus of Hamas’ documents has become replete with atypical voices, particularly of articles for American and British broadsheets signed by Hamas’ most visible leaders, but also television interviews, and other public interventions. Indeed, over the past few years it is precisely these comments released to the press that portray the changes which, if not ideological, are nonetheless taking place in terms of political

⁹³ http://ro-a.redorbit.com/news/international/250348/leading_hamas_figure_on_possibility_of_charter_change_recognizing_israel/index.html

⁹⁴ Author’s interview with Hamed Bitawi, Nablus, November 2nd, 2008.

⁹⁵ Khalid Amayreh, “ Hamas Debates the Future: Palestine’s Islamic Resistance Movement Attempts to Reconcile Ideological Purity and Political Realism”, *Conflicts Forum*, November 2007, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Author’s interview with Ahmed Youssef, Gaza City, November 6th, 2007.

⁹⁷ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

⁹⁸ Author’s interview with Mahmoud A-Zahhar, Gaza City, December 6th, 2007.

strategy. These changes have not eliminated all ambiguities, but they have certainly attempted to soften certain positions, particularly at crucial moments, for example in the delicate phase during which Hamas was exploring the possibility of international legitimization through participation in the institutions of the Palestinian National Authority. In the meantime, according to some exponents of Hamas, the secret discussion over the *Mithaq* kept going, as it had for years, particularly on the article defining Palestine as a *waqf*: changing that point would mean allowing the Islamist movement to cut the Gordian knot preventing it from recognizing Israel, and which still forces it to talk in terms of truce and not in terms of peace.

Outsiders...

The Hamas Charter had not yet been made public and indeed was not even written when Mahmoud A-Zahhar met Shimon Peres for the first time. The Intifada dramatically exploded less than four months earlier, and Hamas was still in the process of defining its role within the uprising when, on March 28th, 1988, the then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres asked to meet the person who already at that time was clearly becoming one of Gaza's Islamist leaders. Sitting at his desk at the Foreign Ministry in Gaza City, a tall building that in December 2007 bore very evident signs of an Israeli bombardment, Mahmoud A-Zahhar emphasizes that he “did not go to meet him voluntarily. I was forced to”.⁹⁹ In his office, unadorned and darkened by the curtains drawn for security reasons, A-Zahhar recalls the circumstances under which, nearly twenty years ago, he found himself facing Peres and other fifteen people between military personnel and members of the Israeli security establishment. Peres had one question: how to solve the Intifada. A-Zahhar's response was to become the Islamists' first initiative with regard to the Israelis: “The offer I made him consisted in three points”, he explains, namely: “declare that you Israelis are ready to pull out of the West Bank and Gaza; place the Territory under the control of a neutral authority in order to minimize our suffering and end the occupation. Thirdly, the Palestinians would have to choose a representative by means of an election or even through an agreement, in order to continue negotiations with the Israelis. We in Hamas, I told him, are not ready to negotiate independently, because what we are talking about concerns the national interest”. Peres' answer was: we can pull out of Gaza immediately, we need six months to leave the West Bank, we'll postpone discussions with regard to Jerusalem. “And I told him that it would be very difficult to find anyone among the Palestinians who could accept Jerusalem being placed last on the order of discussions – Jerusalem should be first. I made a mistake at the time, because the Israelis did find someone who was not only ready to delay discussions about Jerusalem, but someone who was prepared to abandon it forever”.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Author's interview with Mahmoud A-Zahhar, Gaza City, December 6th, 2007. A-Zahhar also recalls meetings with Israeli political and military leaders in an autobiographical piece included in Haim Gordon, Rivca Gordon and Taher Shriteh (eds.) *Beyond Intifada. Narratives of Freedom Fighters in the Gaza Strip*, Praeger, Westport, Conn.-London, 2003, p. 116. See also Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁰⁰ Author's interview with Mahmoud A-Zahhar, Gaza City, December 6th, 2007.

As Mahmoud A-Zahhar recalls – and this is well-known – there were other meetings. Including with Yitzhak Rabin, then Minister of Defense, in Tel Aviv, over a year after the meeting with Peres. The Intifada was not over, the Israeli authorities had already arrested the men who had established Hamas after the publication of the Movement’s founding Charter in August 1988. Shaykh Ahmed Yassin had managed to escape arrest for a few months, while he was busy building the movement’s organizational structure, including the military wing which had begun to appear publicly, heralding the beginning of the phase of kidnapping and killing soldiers. The Israeli government was still attempting to find a way of moving beyond the impasse the Intifada had produced, and it is at exactly this time that the secret contacts which would lead to the Oslo Accords were being established with the PLO leadership in exile. In mid-May 1989 Rabin then decides to make a final attempt, meeting not only with a Hamas representative, but also with the other main Palestinian factions, including Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – all in all about fifteen people. The meeting concludes without significant steps forward, with A-Zahhar suggesting to Rabin the same proposal he had made to Peres a year earlier. No precondition was set for that meeting, despite the fact that the *Mithaq* had already been published. In any case, the brief period during which Israel tried to talk to Hamas ended with that meeting, and the twenty years of clashes without quarter began between the many governments which succeed each other in power in Israel on the one hand, and the Palestinian Islamist movement on the other.

Between the Seventies and the Eighties, Israel had looked with a kind of benevolence upon the Muslim Brotherhood which in the West Bank and in Gaza appeared to wish to set themselves apart from the nationalist, secular and leftist factions all engaged in the national liberation struggle, while the Ikhwan concentrated on social and educational work, between mosques and support centers. The birth of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* brusquely changes the Israeli authorities’ perception of Islamist sectors of society. They quickly realize the difference between the Ikhwan establishment and its operations branch. Not two days go by from Rabin’s last meeting with A-Zahhar, when Tsahal and the security services carry out the second, massive wave of arrests against Hamas decided by the Israeli authorities. This time, about two thousand five hundred people – says A-Zahhar¹⁰¹ – ended up in prison with the accusation of belonging to the Islamist movement, which had been included by the Tel Aviv authorities in the list of terrorist organizations. In practice, Israel had decapitated Hamas, arresting not only Ahmed Yassin, but also Ismail Abu Shanab, probably without realizing that it was precisely Abu Shanab who was the movement’s leader at that time.¹⁰² Two years later, Yassin would be sentenced to life in prison.

Hamas is therefore suddenly forced to rebuild its network, while missing the person who had most pushed to establish the organization after the First Intifada. It is at this point which the leadership in exile decisively comes to the fore, a leadership born and bred in the diaspora.¹⁰³ The wave of arrests which made things very difficult for the organization: the Islamist movement was on its knees, but was reborn thanks to the arrival of one man in Gaza with the specific task of re-establishing the organization’s

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Author’s interview with Sayyed Abu Musameh, Gaza City, October, 26th, 2008.

¹⁰³ Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, op. cit., pp. 60-61.

structures, one man who would leave his mark on Hamas' history over the following two decades: Moussa Abu Marzouq. Born in 1951 in a refugee camp in Rafah, at the southern end of the Gaza strip, with a degree in engineering from Egypt, an American 'green card' and a US doctorate, Abu Marzouq from that moment takes on the number one role in the political office, the executive branch designated by the *majlis al-shura*, the consultative council, itself comprising at different times between twenty and fifty members both within and outside the Palestinian Occupied Territory. In Gaza, which he knows well not least because he was one of those who established the Islamic University, Abu Marzouq manages to rebuild a network so that it cannot be destroyed by a new wave of arrests. It is practically impossible to understand how Abu Marzouq managed to not only re-establish the group's structure, but also to put in place an organization which over the following two decades would manage to escape more or less intact despite the waves of arrests, the targeted assassinations of the leadership carried out by the Israelis, and the closure of those organizations considered to be connected to Hamas. One of the explanations which is usually offered is that the network established within Gaza became increasingly dependent on the leadership abroad, which could manage Hamas during those phases in which it was weakened after waves of arrests carried out by Israel. The other hypothesis is that there was a continuous replenishment of militants¹⁰⁴, which would imply a very close connection with the population, with local communities, which provide Hamas with its grass-roots support. Confirming the latter hypothesis is the opinion of Abu Marzouq held in the Gaza Strip, many years after the re-organization of 1989. In 2007, a prominent leader of Hamas in Gaza maintained that the organization was still based on the help provided by Abu Marzouq, who in certain circles is held in even higher regard than Khaled Meshaal.

The re-organization of Hamas carried out by Abu Marzouq became a watershed in the Islamist movement's history, because it is from then on that the equilibrium between the leadership inside the Territory – in the West Bank and in Gaza in particular – and their counterparts in the diaspora was established. However, upon closer inspection, the period spanning the Eighties and the Nineties is a difficult one, and not just for that part of the Islamist movement which remains within the borders of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, deprived as it was of its leadership incarcerated in Israeli jails. The diasporic leadership is also going through a transitional phase during which it reels from the repercussions of the Gulf Crisis between 1990 and 1991, when Palestinians were expelled from Kuwait after Yasser Arafat had staked his position in support of Saddam Hussein. Despite the fact that the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* had been careful in keeping its distance from Arafat's pro-Iraqi pronouncements, all Palestinians pay the price, bar no one. From one day to the next, those in the West Bank and in Gaza lose a considerable slice of the remittances which previously arrived from the Gulf, while those in the diaspora, who suffer the consequences of Kuwaiti vengeance, are suddenly forced to leave the Emirate and all they had managed to build over decades of emigration. Hamas is also among those who must count the costs of this defeat because, as Azzam Tamimi confirms, "it carried out much of its work in Kuwait, from relations with the press, to the organization itself."¹⁰⁵ During the 1991 Gulf War, Hamas had attempted to maintain a certain degree of ambiguity. This was for two reasons. On the one hand, from

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 61.

¹⁰⁵ Author's interview with Azzam Tamimi, London, July 12th, 2008.

a general point of view, through the annexation of Kuwait, Iraq was achieving what traditional political Islam considered to be one of its main objectives: to re-unite the Arab-Muslim world. On the other hand, from an ideological point of view, Saddam Hussein was still held to be one of the Muslim Brotherhood's most powerful enemies, the principal heir to Ba'athist secular nationalism, who had invaded a Gulf country, one in which adherence to Islam was considered closest to the Ikhwan's *desiderata*.

The ambiguity of its position alone, however, is not enough to save Hamas' from the consequences of the 1991 Gulf War. The Islamist movement is forced to choose another location for its headquarters – the choice later became Amman – from which to manage relations with the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which from the outset had been designated as the location where the struggle with Israel would take place. The outside world – Arab states included – would not be dragged into it, as had happened with the secular nationalist factions during the phase of hijackings and of terrorist attacks, which took place primarily in Europe. Even after the stinging experience of the PLO's expulsion from Beirut at the hands of the Israelis in 1982, Hamas chose not to embarrass the countries with which it had relations, and thus not to alienate the Arab world, to the point of not taking a position on the internal affairs of individual states. Ever since 1948, the Arab world's relationship with Palestinians had always been built upon a very precarious equilibrium, which for some countries was made unstable both by the presence of refugees, and by the leadership changes in individual national regimes, and not least by the changes in strategy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict made by Arab governments. The choice made by the Hamas leadership abroad was clear: it was better not to embarrass privileged interlocutors, not least because they had to preserve themselves in order to be able to support the Islamist cadres within the West Bank and Gaza, who were far more exposed to Israel's reactions.

At the beginning of the Nineties, the Islamist leadership still maintained good relations with Jordan despite the problems created by Arafat's position on Amman's larger neighbor, Iraq. These were relations born of individual circumstances, such as the fact that some of the Hamas leadership had Jordanian passports or the fact that several of those who were inside the West Bank or Gaza had studied in Amman. There were also relations built with Jordanians, based on the link with the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood in Amman, which had kept in touch with and supported the birth of Hamas, at times despite its own preferences. The credit which the Islamist movement gained, however, was based on the overall loyalty which the Muslim Brotherhood had shown King Hussein in the years before the Six-Day War. This credit, however, was slowly being extinguished during the first half of the Nineties. Over time, the consolidation of the Oslo process and of the Palestinian National Authority, the winds of peace sweep up King Hussein as well, who on October 26th, 1994, signs a historical treaty with Israel. As a consequence, supporting the continued presence of Hamas' foreign bureau on his territory becomes increasingly difficult and embarrassing for the Hashemite monarch, particularly after the beginning of the long season of suicide attacks which began in April of that year in Afula, in the north of Israel, in response to the massacre carried out by Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein in the Hebron mosque, in which twenty-nine people had been killed while at prayer. Hamas' leaders in Jordan not only failed to condemn the suicide attacks, but in fact consider them within the rights of Palestinians to resist the occupation.

Statements of this kind released in Amman increasingly embarrass the Hashemite monarchy. As well as the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood.

The man who understands that the atmosphere has changed is Abu Marzouq, who still in 1995 headed the political bureau: Abu Marzouq is expelled from Jordan in the spring of 1995, he looks for another host. In the end, he resolves to return to the United States, the only country in which he would have been able to live with his family, since some of his children are American nationals and he himself possesses a 'green card'. Hamas' number one, however, is arrested on July 25th of that year, in the USA itself, provoking yet another earthquake in the Hamas leadership, already deprived of Ahmed Yassin who since 1989 was held in an Israeli prison. Detained in an American jail, Abu Marzouq's case is resolved in the spring of 1997 after a twenty-month struggle. Israel, which had submitted a formal extradition request, lets the procedure drop, and the United States resolve to send Abu Marzouq back to Jordan, which has agreed to take him back, at least temporarily. In the meantime, however, his place had been taken by Khaled Meshaal, who until the moment of Abu Marzouq's arrest was the political bureau's number two. Abu Marzouq's and Khaled Meshaal's roles had, in practice, been inverted: Abu Marzouq would remain in a rather unique position as a sidekick, leaving the stage to Meshaal, but without losing the status which would allow him throughout the following decade, to independently maintain a range of relations across the Arab world, making him one of the few Hamas leaders capable, for example, of negotiating with Egypt.

...and Insiders

At the beginning of the Nineties, Hamas' structure within the West Bank and Gaza was still paying the price of the frequent waves of arrests carried out by the Israelis. Ahmed Yassin is in prison, like many Islamist leaders. The attacks carried out by Hamas' military wing against Israeli soldiers, however, do not stop. On the contrary, in December 1992 they reach a peak, with six soldiers killed in the course of a few days within the boundaries of the Palestinian Occupied Territory. The reaction by the Rabin Government, however, comes after the brief kidnapping of border guard Nissim Toledano on December 13th in Lod, inside Israel, who Hamas wanted to exchange with Ahmed Yassin, who had been sentenced to life in prison. Toledano is killed immediately after the Israeli refusal of any negotiation, the very night of December 13th, while Israel had already undertaken one of the most extensive waves of arrests in the recent history of the conflict, detaining one thousand three hundred people in the space of a few hours. Barely a few days pass since the tragic conclusion of the kidnapping, and despite a contrary ruling of the Israeli Supreme Court, the government in Tel Aviv decides to deport four hundred and fifteen Palestinians – mostly Hamas members, but also affiliates of Islamic Jihad – to Southern Lebanon, which its forces still occupied.¹⁰⁶ On December 17th, hundreds of Palestinians, each with fifty dollars in their pockets, were left in the "security zone" in South Lebanon. Having failed in their attempts to return, the deported prisoners of Marj al-Zuhour begin their media and political struggle described in the preceding

¹⁰⁶ On Israeli pacifist organization B'Tselem's appeals to the Supreme Court, see Deportation of Palestinians from the Occupied Territory and the Mass Deportation of December 1992, Jerusalem, June 1993, available at http://www.btselem.org/Download/199306_Deportation_Eng.doc.

chapter, and which would come to a conclusion only in the autumn of 1993, when the Islamists would return to the West Bank and to Gaza.

In the most difficult moments of its history, Hamas demonstrates a strategic skill rarely seen in other movements. Marj al-Zuhour is perhaps the most spectacular example of this because of the impact it has on different kinds of audiences. There can be no doubt of its influence on Palestinians within the West Bank and Gaza, just as on the refugee camps in neighboring countries. For the first time, however, the impact extends to an international audience as well, an audience who knew very little about Hamas and which began to familiarize itself with its faces, voices, claims and political proclamations. Beyond that, Marj al-Zuhour becomes an event which increases Hamas' standing with Palestinian public opinion, which comes to see the small refugee camp at the border with still-occupied Lebanon, within the 'security zone', as a way of achieving a kind of redemption. Hamas' militants defy Israel, and Israel is forced to give in.

What happened at Marj al-Zuhour that could be so spectacular as to make those ten months an event which took on legendary proportions in everyone's memories, both those among the Islamist leadership who were among the 415 who were deported and among those who witnessed the events simply as spectators? For a start, Hamas managed to link Marj al-Zuhour directly with the *Nakba*, the catastrophe of 1948, so that their victory would overturn – if only symbolically – those decade-old events. The Islamists immediately – on the very night of the deportation – decide that they will remain inside that buffer zone in which they had been left by the Israelis and not move on to Lebanon, where they would have swelled the ranks of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who already lived between Sidon and Tripoli. The challenge is: “We either manage to get back to our land, or we stay here”. Having failed in their first objective, the prisoners deported to Marj al-Zuhour decide to remain in the open countryside, in extremely harsh environmental conditions. It is winter, and extremely cold: they receive help from the International Red Cross and they establish what Mohamed Nimers calls a fully-fledged “Islamist society”.¹⁰⁷

A camp is built relying on the skills of several of those present among the 415: engineers and technicians organize logistics, university professors organize classes for the students among the deported, doctors take care not only of those at the camp, but go out to help the population in nearby villages. A tent-mosque is erected, where classes are also held, and a medical tent takes care of the sick and even manages to produce statistics on the population's health. Those among the Hamas leadership who were there recall the structure of the camp, organized on the basis of geographical criteria, with a tent for Nablus, one for Hebron, another for Gaza, and so on: a way of re-establishing pre-existing local ties, while in parallel the Hamas deportees take advantage of the unique opportunity which Marj al-Zuhour offers them to get to know each other and to debate among themselves. Many of them had never met, so in Hamas' history Marj al-Zuhour becomes one of those extremely rare occasions in which the cadres manage to overcome the sputtering lines of communication they were used to, strengthening some bonds and debating the group's political strategy. Beyond that, Marj al-Zuhour also becomes a place accessible to other Islamist movements: Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh, one of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's leaders, for example, recalls how he was able to meet Abdel Aziz

¹⁰⁷ Mohamed Nimers, *The Structural Development of an Islamist Society*, available at <http://www.islamonline.net/iol-english/qadaya/qpolitic0.asp>.

al-Rantisi only rarely during his days as a medical student in Egypt, and how he then met him once more in Marj al-Zuhour, when he brought with him aid from the Egyptian doctors' association.¹⁰⁸

For Israel, the incident of the prisoners deported to South Lebanon quickly turns into a political boomerang, resolved with the Islamists' return, when after a long negotiations Hamas members accept a return in small groups to their places of origin. For the Rabin government this is a defeat, one which mirrors the event, several years later, of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in the summer of 2005. In that case as well, Hamas used the withdrawal of soldiers and settlers to declare victory on the field. In 1992 as much as in 2005, a solely military and security-driven response brought neither immediate success nor victory in the medium term for Tel Aviv. On the contrary, in Marj al-Zuhour, Hamas managed to emerge strengthened as a player in the Middle East conflict because it not only achieved media prominence for the event, but it also emerged onto the scene of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a new protagonist, as yet little known outside the confines of the crisis.

For Arafat, on the other hand, the events of Marj al-Zuhour confirm that Hamas cannot simply be eliminated from the Palestinian political scene – at best, it can be contained. Without Hamas, managing Palestinian politics is impossible, even after the beginning of the Oslo peace process, to which Hamas – from the very beginning – is opposed because it considers 'that peace' unjust. The 'no' to Oslo would never be in doubt within the Islamist movement, who considers it fully a betrayal of Palestinian aspirations. A 'betrayal' which does not lead to the objectives Hamas has set itself both in its foundational Charter and elsewhere. Moreover, the peace process elevates the PLO to legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and in practice definitively ends Islamist attempts to join the Palestine Liberation Organization with a status similar, if not equivalent, to Fatah's. These attempts had taken place throughout the entire previous phase preceding the Madrid conference of 1991, the first public step in the peace process.¹⁰⁹

For the Islamist movement, however, opposing the Oslo process does not mean opposing the idea of the National Authority which would result from the Oslo negotiations. Although Hamas had never wished to be part of the PNA structure, it had always had a relationship with the authorities in charge – albeit perhaps through channels which were not publicly visible – born from the necessity of administering the West Bank and Gaza, of attending to the population's basic necessities. Hamas has therefore always dealt with the relationship with the PNA so as not to close any doors. In Osama Hamdan's words: "We boycotted the *political* dimension of the Authority, in the sense that we wanted no part in the PNA. But the administration of daily matters could not be undertaken separately. This is why we took part when it was a matter of supporting Palestinians in their daily lives".¹¹⁰ Epitome of this participation in the community's daily life is the case of the participation by certain intellectuals close to or even part of Hamas in the preparation work carried out by the Centre responsible for the elaboration of a national curriculum for PNA schools. This participation also explains why, after Hamas'

¹⁰⁸ Author's interview with Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh, Cairo, November 28th, 2007.

¹⁰⁹ Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, op. cit., pp. 91-93.

¹¹⁰ Author's interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008. See also Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit., pp. 103-109.

rise to power in March 2006, the debate over the curriculum was not re-opened, nor did it become the object of a political-cultural clash: on the contrary, the agreement on the curriculum had been one of the most widely shared across the entire political spectrum in the West Bank and in Gaza. Aziz Dweik, who teaches at Al-Najah University in Nablus, and who later became the Parliament's Speaker after the 2006 elections, had taken part in the elaboration of the geography curriculum for year 11, the penultimate in secondary education.

This does not mean that relations were always idyllic – on the contrary. After an initial honeymoon period lasting a few months after the installment of the PNA in Gaza I 1994, Hamas tried to exert pressure on Yasser Arafat's Authority. But the reaction is harsh, and it is Fatah's leader and the PLO who win this first clash. The event which defines this first clash is the demonstration called for by the Islamist movement in November of that year at the Palestine Mosque in Gaza City, and the battle with PNA security forces which ensued, which ended in a bloody tally of thirteen killed by the police forces which had been deployed surrounding the sacred building. This clash is serious enough that it affects the very historical reconstruction, the 'narrative' which Hamas on the one side and Fatah on the other have undertaken with regard to the history of their relations, epitomizing its highs and lows. Over the years, particularly since 2003, relations between Hamas and the PNA have been influenced both by events on the ground such as suicide attacks undertaken by the Islamist movement's military wing, and by developments in the peace process between the PNA and Israel. One thing by now seems certain: the door was never slammed completely shut, even when Yasser Arafat chose the path of repression, undertaking waves of arrests which from time to time would drag hundreds of Hamas militants into prison, or even when the cases of torture undertaken by Muhammad Dahlan's Preventive Security Forces were revealed. It is from this point, in the mid-Nineties, that Gaza's strongman becomes Hamas' adversary *par excellence*, when he drags Islamist leaders and militants into jail. Mahmoud A-Zahhar, amongst those arrested, tells of the torture he underwent in an autobiographical volume where he also details offensive acts carried out against prisoners, such as having his beard forcefully shaved off.¹¹¹ Dahlan's role in the repression of militants during the Nineties is one none of the militants can forget, particularly during the period he became a close adviser to President Mahmoud Abbas.

Yasser Arafat, however, does not use only the 'stick' of arrests. He also tried to involve Hamas, especially when he understands that it has strong roots within Palestinian society, as it does in Gaza. And the Islamist movement, for its part, reacts to the changes by asking itself how it should adapt its role, whether it should evolve into a political party and take part in elections regardless, or whether it should remain distant from a new all-Palestinian institution which might arrive in the West Bank and Gaza. This is a slow debate, which goes on for years, and which has produced documents – all internal and secret – which only rarely have reached the outside, and read if at all only by highly specialized audiences such as historians or political scientists. These internal documents are very different from the rhetoric of the founding Charter of 1988, from the Intifada leaflets, and from the fiery public proclamations. On the contrary, these are fully-fledged scenarios outlined to the leadership in order to decide whether it would be appropriate to

¹¹¹ From A-Zahhar in Haim Gordon, Rivca Gordon and Taher Shriteh (eds.) *Beyond Intifada: Narratives of Freedom Fighters in the Gaza Strip*, op. cit., pp. 120-121.

change the nature of Hamas or not. Epitomizing these kinds of documents is a discussion paper dated 1992, that is before the signing of the Declaration of Principles and the 13 September 1993 handshake between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin on the White House lawn in Washington. The central question in this document is: how should we behave in the event of elections? And the answer is: we must choose between four clearly distinct alternatives, i.e. take part in the elections, boycott them, boycott them by means including force, or participate under a different name.¹¹² Thus, the possibility of establishing a fully-fledged political party becomes real. Across the Arab world there are several examples of this: above all, there is the experience of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, which divided the Ikhwan proper from the Islamic Action Front, in which guise the Ikhwan appears before voters. One of the possible scenarios envisaged by the 1992 document presages what would happen in 2005, when Hamas undertook the most important change in its history in deciding to participate in parliamentary elections. The 1992 document states “our goal might not be to win a majority, but, rather, to achieve a significant [political] presence, which would secure the movement’s power and political weigh”.¹¹³ The Palestinian case, however, is different, and Hamas does not yet want to give up that term “resistance” which marked its birth in 1987.

According to Ghazi Hamad “it is true, we discussed whether we should establish a political party or not, because we had before us a new system. And a party would have been a good instrument to establish contacts with the PNA. In this way, Hamas would have remained the resistance movement, without becoming entangled in politics”¹¹⁴. Hamad thinks back to a time now long gone while he talks about the debate over the establishment of what would later become the Islamic Salvation Front, the *Hizb al-Khalas al-Watani al-Islami*, in 1996. It is October of 2008, exactly two months before Israel began Operation Cast Lead, the Gaza Strip has already been isolated for months, and Ghazi Hamad continues to be one of the more pragmatic, more moderate Hamas leaders, a movement of which he has been part from the very beginning, a classic example of those young men who adhered to the Muslim Brotherhood at the start of the Eighties. During the hardest moments of 2008, Ghazi Hamad managed to carve out a political space for himself in a context in which it was mostly others, the hawks, who were doing the talking. His own account of the al-Khalas experience was in some ways a journey backwards, in which the past merges with events which occurred many years later. Hamad, born in 1964 in a refugee camp in Rafah, in the southern section of the Gaza Strip, says: “within Hamas, we began talking about the party in 1994, then it was debated with the PNA, and the final decision was taken a year later, once Yasser Arafat had also given his consent.” But 1995 was a tense, difficult period: already in 1994, Hamas had begun undertaking suicide attacks. Hamad calls them “military operations”, thereby setting himself apart in the language he uses not only from the hawks, but also from the majority of the rest of the Islamist movement, which calls these suicide attacks “martyrdom operations”. In the end, the party is established in 1996, after the first general elections, which Hamas boycotted. The party, Al-Khalas, would be short-lived,

¹¹² Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, op. cit., pp. 122-130. The text also relays the full 1992 document.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Author’s interview with Ghazi Hamad, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008. All subsequent citations are drawn from this interview.

an experiment which all in all lasted less than four years, up until the year 2000. Ghazi Hamad, however, calls it “a fantastic experience” the end of which meant “ Hamas lost much”. Al-Khalas had established good relations with the PLO, and Arafat had even given his blessing, despite knowing all too well that the party was established by Hamas, and that Hamas also sustained it financially.

Among the party’s principle figures were Hamas’ more pragmatic leaders. Ghazi Hamad, who was its spokesperson, reels off names like Yehya Moussa, Salah al-Bardawil, Ismail al-Ashkar, and Ahmed Bahar – all names which in 2006 would become deputies in the Palestinian parliament’s second legislature. As Hamad recalls: “Most of the party members were open-minded, they had a new vision of politics. Hamas, however, was still too sensitive on certain topics, so much so that the relationship between Hamas and al-Khalas did not go beyond a typical father-son relationship. The message was: you are under our supervision, under my eyes, and you can do nothing without co-coordinating with me. So, well, we did not succeed in establishing a greater distance between us – Al-Khalas – and Hamas. We did not succeed in cutting the umbilical cord. In that particular political situation, it was not easy for us to take decisions far from Hamas’ gaze, as they were ultimately our point of reference, as well as our funders.” In short, in 1996, resistance and politics could not part ways. “At the time,” Hamad concludes, “Hamas was not politically mature enough to give the party freedom to maneuver. Hamas dominated the party, and its control was too strong ... even to allow it to take part in the 1996 elections. At the time, I argued on the contrary that we should have taken part. But that decision would take Hamas another ten years”.¹¹⁵ It is true that for months Hamas debates whether or not it should take part in the first general elections in the West Bank, Gaza and in East Jerusalem. These are the first elections for the Palestinian National Authority with which, however, the Islamist movement is not collaborating because it opposes the Oslo process and the kind of peace that the Accords envisage. Yasser Arafat tries up until the last moment to reach an agreement with Hamas, and the negotiations, which involve both the leadership in the West Bank and Gaza and the leadership abroad, are conducted outside the Occupied Palestinian Territory precisely so that the Islamist leadership might meet, thereby avoiding the delays inherent in a long-distance discussion. In December 1995, the Palestinian National Authority convinces the Israelis to allow out Hamas members from the West Bank and Gaza, and a rare meeting is convened in Khartoum, in Sudan, attended by the entire Hamas leadership. The lively discussions go on for four days. It concluded that taking part in those elections was impossible.

According to Osama Hamdan, “it made us laugh when we heard the voices according to which a fatwa had been issued prohibiting taking part in the 1996 general elections. During the previous months no such fatwa was issued: it was a purely political decision. Boycotting the elections must be considered a democratic decision, just like participation is a democratic decision”.¹¹⁶ Eyes on the present, Hamdan recalls the other elections, the first of the PNA era, which Hamas decided not to take part in. It was no fatwa, no religious edict, which prevented Hamas from taking part. Hamdan’s interpretation is confirmed by shaykh Hamed Bitawi, a religious authority in Nablus, who newspapers at the time indicated as the source of the fatwa against the elections. Shaykh

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

Bitawi says “It’s not true”, sharply bringing this discussion to an end on the veranda of his Nablus apartment on the city’s hillside. “I never issued any edict. The decision was taken by the movement. I issued dozens of fatwas, but on entirely different topics: against the opening of the casino in Jericho, or against the festival which was being organized in Sabastya, just outside the city of Nablus.”¹¹⁷ Osama Hamdan explains that “Fatah was asking us not only to take part in the elections, but also to put an end to the resistance. We, on the other hand, argued that it was necessary for another Palestinian group to say no, that Oslo would not have worked. The Israelis had not recognized the Palestinians as a nation, but only as a people present on the land. As though we were renting an apartment”.¹¹⁸

Thus, the choice to take part in electoral politics, was in fact possible in 1996, when the Palestinian National Authority’s first general elections were called. Despite the ‘no’ from the Hamas summit in Khartoum, part of the movements composed of members from the West Bank and from Gaza wants to participate badly enough to choose a provocation: it presented a list of candidates. Well-known figures do this, including three leaders like Ismail Haniyeh – who would in future become the first Hamas member to fill the post of Palestinian Prime Minister – Sa’id Namruti and Khalid Hindi. They register their names as independents at the electoral office, save later withdrawing them on January 2nd. The Hamas leaders themselves explain the reasons behind their gesture, as the *Jerusalem Post* reports on January 19th, 1996. They explain that “We mandated ourselves to be a safety valve when Hamas’ relations with the Palestinian National Authority were in crisis”, adding that “in nominating ourselves for the forthcoming elections, we believed in serving Islam and the homeland. But clue to the eruption of a state of confusion within the Islamic circle, and despite our conviction in the value of our beliefs, we decided to withdraw our candidacies”.¹¹⁹ The pressure to withdraw those candidacies came from the result of the debate between two different political positions. The first, which emerged within the internal leadership, views electoral participation with favor, and receives support from those members who are more closely linked to society, to chambers of commerce, to the student movement and to trade unions.¹²⁰ Although this is a minority within the movement, it is a significant one, within which several members who participated in the Al-Khalas experiment – such as Ahmed Baher – are active. The second school of thought, with which the leadership in exile in Amman is associated, is against mitigating the clash with the PLO and with Fatah which began when negotiations with the Israelis were undertaken, first at the Madrid conference, and then with the Oslo process.

One of the Palestinian journalists who have followed this question more closely – Khaled Amayreh, from Hebron – argues that an “acrimonious internal debate” took place between the hardliners and the minority who believed that participation was the lesser of two evils. One of the hardliners was one of the best-known Islamist preachers of the time, Bassam Jarrar, who in early December states that “the decision to boycott [...] is

¹¹⁷ Author’s interview with Hamed Bitawi, Nablus, November 2nd, 2008.

¹¹⁸ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

¹¹⁹ Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of Palestinian Authority. From Oslo to Al-Aqsa*, Routledge, New York-London 2005, p. 193.

¹²⁰ Andreas Tai, “Widerstand im Namens Allahs. Hamas als politischer Faktor im Friedensprozess”, in Ferhad Ibrahim and Abraham Ashkenasi (eds.) *Der Friedensprozess im Nahen-Osten: Eine Revision*, LIT, Berlin-Hamburg-Muenster, 1998, p. 157.

definitive and irrevocable because these elections will be an enormous farce aimed at legitimizing the Oslo Accords and to perpetuating the occupation and usurpation of our land by Israel".¹²¹ The clash reaches its apex on December 10th, when the movement's spokesperson in Amman, Ibrahim Ghoshe, announces the election boycott on the same day as the demonstrations held in Nablus, at the Al-Najah University, to mark the eighth anniversary of the beginning of the First Intifada and of the establishment Hamas.¹²² Osama Hamdan recalls that "Haniyeh was attacked in Gaza for his decision to present himself as a candidate, so we decided to discuss it with him ourselves, and he decided to withdraw his name from the list".¹²³

It is said that after a specific request from the PNA, Hamas had decided to suspend attacks in a sort of electoral truce. Four Hamas leaders told this to Islamist journalist Khaled Amayreh. This period of time would have been determined by "Palestinian national interests", although any Israeli attack against Hamas would have meant the end of the truce. Hamas' internal debate on a truce, however, is interrupted by the killing on January 5th, 1996, of Yahya Ayyash, nicknamed 'the Engineer' (*al-muhandis*), who was one of the commanders of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas' armed wing, which had decided to come into the open in 1992. For the members of the Kata'eb al-Qassam, as for the Israelis, Ayyash, thirty years old and an engineering graduate from Bir Zeit, was the instigator and planner behind many suicide attacks, and more importantly he specialized in the preparation of explosives. At the time Israel does not admit to the 'targeted assassination', but Ayyash tops its black list, and the killing of 'the Engineer' was so sophisticated that it pointed to Israeli involvement: Ayyash dies when a mobile phone which had been lent to him by an acquaintance explodes while he is making a phone call in Beit Lahya, in the northern part of the Gaza Strip.

After his targeted assassination, one of the most spectacular undertaken by the Israeli security forces, two distinct opinions clash with each other, at least according to the little news which can be found on the secret internal debate. The first option, to which members like Mahmoud A-Zahhar in Gaza and Jamil Hamami in the West Bank subscribe, supports to the view that a retaliation using suicide attacks would have provoked a disproportionate Israeli reaction, and would have re-ignited the clashes between the Palestinian National Authority and Hamas. For the military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, to not react at all would have been perceived as a sign of weakness and would have jeopardized Hamas' credibility.¹²⁴ As the facts themselves demonstrate, the hardliners win the day, and in February and March four of the bloodiest suicide attacks are carried out. Two of these take place on the same day: one near Jerusalem's central bus station, with a final tally of twenty-six dead, and the other in Ashkelon, where a suicide bomber blows himself up near a crossroad popular with hitchhikers. On March 3rd, in Jerusalem, nineteen people die on the Number 18 bus on Jaffa Road, the city's busiest road. The following day, another thirteen people are killed by a suicide attacker in Tel Aviv in the equally central Dizengoff Center. Shaykh Jamil Hamami, one of Hamas' founders, leaves the movement immediately after the bloody

¹²¹ Khaled Amayreh, "Hamas says no", in *Middle East International*, December 15th, 1995, p. 8.

¹²² Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of Palestinian Authority. From Oslo to Al-Aqsa*, op. cit., p. 193.

¹²³ Author's interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

¹²⁴ Muhammad Muslih, "Hamas: Strategy and Tactics", Leonard Binder (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East*, University of Florida Press, Miami 1999, p. 325.

sequence of four attacks. Israel launches a wave of arrests which brings around a thousand Hamas militants into Israeli prisons, and Arafat's PNA does the same, even though it would later slowly release them. This is one of the harshest moments ever of the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yitzhak Rabin had been killed a few months earlier, on November 5th, 1995, at the hands of a right-wing Israeli extremist; then Hamas re-starts its attacks: the climate of fear and the end of the Oslo dream profoundly affect Israeli elections, facilitating a sharp turn to the right. Labor's hold on government comes to a sudden end, and Likud's new man, Binyamin Netanyahu, comes to power.

With his actions, Netanyahu immediately shows that the Israeli government's politics would be different from that of Shimon Peres, roundly defeated in the elections, and specifically that he would not follow in the footsteps of Yitzhak Rabin. This much becomes immediately clear in the first few months of his mandate, when he gives the go-ahead to the continuation of settlement expansion, particularly in the Jerusalem area, towards Bethlehem, with the birth of large Har Homa settlement on the hill known to Palestinians as Jabal Abu Ghneim. Later, the opening of the Hasmonean tunnel in Jerusalem's Old City towards the end of September 1996, heads to a mini-intifada, which leads to fifty-four dead and eight hundred wounded among Palestinians, and fourteen Israeli soldiers killed. This act was called a provocation not only by the Palestinians, but also by the Jordanians, who supervise the Muslim sacred places in Jerusalem, but Hamas does not react with attacks, despite the fact that this is the peak of the suicide attack phase. In contemporary accounts, this moderation is thought to be one of the reasons for Hamas' increasing popularity, alongside the PNA's decision to free hundreds of Islamist militants. This tacit truce, however, does not last long, just a few months. On July 30th, 1997, two consecutive suicide attacks are carried out in the large popular market of Mahane Yehuda, in the heart of Jerusalem's commercial district, resulting in a tragic balance sheet of sixteen dead and one hundred and seventy-eight wounded. Two months later, on September 4th, just before a visit by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Israel, a second bloody suicide attack takes place a few hundred meters from the site of the July 30th attack, on the Ben Yehuda pedestrian road.

It might appear paradoxical, but while the phase of suicide attacks was in full flow something also moves behind the scenes, the details of which would emerge only years later. It is still September of 1997, barely two weeks have passed since the last attack in Jerusalem, and King Hussein of Jordan communicates personally with Israeli high officials that Hamas is prepared to offer Israel a thirty-year truce, asking the officials to pass the offer on to the Prime Minister personally.¹²⁵ According to revelations made by former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy in 2004, the offer of a thirty-year truce came from shaykh Ahmed Yassin, then held in an Israeli prison. Exactly three days later, Prime Minister Netanyahu calls the Hashemite monarch, but not to discuss Hamas' offer, but rather to resolve an embarrassing incident which had taken just place: two Mossad agents had been captured in Amman as they attempted to poison Khaled Meshaal. The story of the attempted assassination on September 25th, 1997, is well-known, beginning with the aggression against the head of Hamas' political office by Israeli secret service agents who attempt to inject Meshaal with a synthetic opiate, Fentanyl. The Hamas leader's body guards capture the two agents, Meshaal is taken to hospital, and is saved because Israel is forced to pass on details of the antidote. In the meantime, diplomatic services work

¹²⁵ Avi Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan: The life of King Hussein in War and Peace*, Penguin, London 2007, p. 571.

overtime, and it is King Hussein who took charge of negotiations personally, negotiations which would lead to the liberation of shaykh Ahmed Yassin and twenty-two other Palestinian prisoners. This is the price Netanyahu must pay for the failed assassination attempt on Meshaal, but also for a diplomatic incident involving one of the few Arab states friendly to Israel, Hussein's Jordan. For Netanyahu there is a superficial victory in the fact that Hamas' leadership has to leave Amman and that in the near future it would find a home in Damascus. In practice, however, the Meshaal affair is a double defeat for Netanyahu: it manages to definitively sour relations with the Hashemite monarch, already tested by Likud's choice to freeze the Oslo process; it also results in a political boomerang vis-à-vis Hamas, who sees its most charismatic leader, Ahmed Yassin, who everyone had thought to have been definitively sidelined from the political scene thanks to a life sentence, return to the fray.

Shaykh Ahmed Yassin returns on the scene as a protagonist. Yasser Arafat goes to visit him in hospital in Amman, where he was immediately taken to assess his precarious health, as a quadriplegic, after eight years in prison. Arafat made the best of a bad situation: according to leaks to the press at the time, in a Parliamentary meeting on the following 8th of October, Abu Ammar claimed that "Hussein wanted to establish a base for himself in the West Bank through Hamas".¹²⁶ Meanwhile, on his return to Gaza Shaykh Ahmed Yassin is met by massive crowds. After just two months, he starts a diplomatic tour which would bring him to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, the Yemen, Sudan, and Syria: a diplomatic event which Hamas would not have repeated. In a television interview after the killing of Yassin in a 'targeted assassination' in spring of 2004, Halevy confirms that, once out of prison, Yassin had reiterated the offer of a *hudna* (truce), albeit reduced to ten years. But Israel is not interested in truces.

¹²⁶ *Middle East International*, 1997.

Chapter 4 From the brigand-shaykh to human bombs

The preacher at the workers' mosque

“This is the first time the Arabs have their own Tel Hai.”¹²⁷ Tel Hai, Upper Galilee, March 1st, 1920: a place and a date of historic importance in Israel’s collective imagination, associated with the figure of Joseph Trumpeldor, a Russian Jew, symbol of the early Zionists’ self-defense, who died to defend settlements from the attack of a group of armed Lebanese men. The Palestinian Tel Hai, on the other hand, would take place a little further south, in the Jenin area, where the forest of Ya’bad stood. This, at least, is the interpretation offered by David Ben Gurion, Israel’s founding father, upon recalling shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, killed on November 19th, 1935 by British soldiers who were hunting down him and his companions, culpable in their eyes of setting up clandestine armed groups against the His Majesty’s Mandate and against Zionism. “This is the first time that the Arabs have seen that a man can be prepared to give his life for an idea”, says Ben Gurion, who immediately realizes how important the figure of shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam would become for Palestinian nationalism. But the origins of shaykh al-Qassam’s importance predate even this event, reaching back all the way to when, in the Twenties, news began to circulate of a Syrian imam who took care of the poor, of the disinherited and of the workers in Mandate Palestine’s largest port, Haifa.

Nearly ninety years later, the architectural profile of Haifa – the only large mixed city in Israel – is unrecognizable. The Sail Tower, its tallest skyscraper, carves out the sky in the distance, with its imposing vertical curve recalling a full sail in the wind. But the intense green of the Al-Istiqlal Mosque can still be clearly seen. The mosque has recently been restored. Dating to the modernist period, it was established in 1923, sacked by the British, only to be bombed by the Italian air force sailed from its Aegean bases after its entry into World War II in the summer of 1940, and expropriated of its lands by Israeli authorities after 1948. Yet, still today, it is the most important and most active mosque in the city: it is the seat of the *shari’a* court, and of the *waqf* administration. The Istiqlal Mosque, however, owes its fame to its history, a history which reaches beyond Palestinian borders. At the beginning of the 1920s, this place of worship had only recently been opened when a man was called to be its preacher, a man who despite already being elderly had quickly become well-known amongst the poorest, the workers who had arrived in Haifa from the surrounding villages drawn in by the prospect of earning a little money. This Syrian preacher went to look for the faithful in the most degraded areas of the city port, in the streets where prostitution and dives were rife. He had absorbed various schools of Islamic thought: Sufi mysticism, to which his family belonged, as well as the reformist impulse which dominated Cairo’s Al-Azhar University at the time. Al-Azhar was the most prestigious seat of Sunni Islamic learning. The newly-appointed preacher at Haifa’s Al-Istiqlal had studied there during the very same years as

¹²⁷ Shabtai Teveth, *Ben Gurion: the Burning Ground 1886-1948*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1987, p. 512.

Muhammad Abdu and Rashid Rida were teaching – intellectuals whose profound influence would be felt across the various schools of Islamism across the Arab world.

His name would become famous over the space of a few years, so much so that his killing by British soldiers at the end of 1935 came to be seen by some historians as the trigger which would set alight the Great Arab Revolt just a few months later, a revolt which would devastate Mandate Palestine between 1936 and 1939. And yet, no one would have guessed that the name of this brigand-shaykh would become the label of a particular way of seeing political violence amongst Palestinians and across the Middle East both through Hamas' military wing, and in the name chosen for the rockets which the Islamist movement – like other factions – launched against Southern Israeli cities. The brigand-shaykh, Izz al-Din al-Qassam, was probably born in 1882 in the Syrian village of Jebbla, near the coastal city of Latakia. He leaves Al-Azhar University not only with a background as a preacher, but also imbued with the nationalist Arab culture of the early twentieth century. His role as a preacher in his small home village soon became a tight fit for shaykh al-Qassam, who, after a first involvement in the struggle against French colonialism, is forced to escape Syria, finding refuge in Haifa in 1921, a port city and thus a city of workers at the time of the British Mandate in Palestine.

Izz al-Din al-Qassam's preaching in the Istiqlal mosque, quickly spread his fame, although it is his role as co-founder of one of the city's most important trade unions – the Young Men's Muslim Association (YMMA) – alongside the local director of the Arab Bank, Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim, that opens the door to political activism. Izz al-Din al-Qassam's role is specific, heading one of the associations which best embodied radical Palestinian nationalism of the period, its disaffection with notables, with landowners, and with the ineffective politics of Arab parties. His leadership role within the YMMA also allows shaykh al-Qassam to work alongside nationalist activists such as the members of the Independence Party, Al-Istiqlal. It also allows him to become acquainted with the leaders of the notable class in Jerusalem, and to put pressure on them. He attempts to involve the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj al-Amin al-Husseini, in a more radical vision of the clash against the British, but he is unsuccessful.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, it is his daily work with the poorest and most marginalized sectors of society which characterizes Izz al-Din al-Qassam's social and political engagement: Haifa's urban proletariat, the workers in the suburbs of a port city which was undergoing rapid expansion, and to which al-Qassam offers a 'reformed' – purified, at least according to in his own interpretation – vision of Islam, as well as providing support typical of social services, such as literacy courses. In the last phase of shaykh al-Qassam's life, peasants from Galilee join the ranks of the weakest in this industrialized city, whom he encounters during his frequent journeys in the countryside in his capacity as wedding official, and amongst which he looks for followers, including for the groups of *mujahiddeen* which he is in the process of establishing. It is this dimension of his activities which allowed al-Qassam to become one of the few political figures capable of "appealing to the frustration and the anger of the

¹²⁸ Rashid Khalidi, "The Palestinians and 1948. The underlying causes of failure", in Avi Shlaim and Eugene L. Rogan (eds.) *The War For Palestine: Re-writing the History of 1948*, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Abdallah Schleifer, "The Life and Thought of 'Izz-Id-Din Al-Qassam", *The Islamic Quarterly*, vol. XXIII, n. 2, 1979.

popular classes” in Palestine,¹²⁹ and that before the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 made clear to everyone not only the clash between the Palestinians, the British and the Zionists, but also the class divisions which had become more acute after the world economic crisis of 1929.

His political activism is directed not only against British colonization, but also against Zionism, at a time when the Yishuv, the Jewish communities, experience the greatest influx of immigrants. Between the Twenties and the Thirties, authoritarian winds blow across Europe: anti-Semitism grows in Poland to the point of sparking the ‘fourth *aliyah*’, which by 1928 had brought to Palestine seventy thousand Jews. In Germany, by 1935, Nazism consolidates its grip on power, passing a raft of increasingly repressive legislation against Jews, while Italian Fascism also becomes increasingly repressive. As conditions for Europe’s Jews become harsher, there is an exponential increase of Jewish immigration into Mandate Palestine at the beginning of the Thirties. The Yishuv doubles in size in the space of four years, with population going from 175,000 Jews in 1931, to 400,000 in the spring of 1936, while the purchase of Arab land goes from 20,000 *dunum* in 1932 to over 60,000 *dunum* in 1934.¹³⁰ This is the most delicate phase in the life of Mandate Palestine: harsh times, times of changes, not just for Zionism, but also, in parallel, for Palestinian society overall.

After a first phase during which he concentrated on preaching and on the dissemination of ideas, al-Qassam moves from straightforward political activity during the early Thirties to the establishment of fully-fledged armed groups, carrying out attacks against the kibbutz which had become the symbols of Zionism. It was this path which would ultimately lead him to the Ya’bad forest. In November of 1935, the shaykh had gone on the run with a handful of men, barely a dozen of his most trusted companions: according to the most reliable reconstruction of events it appears that the decision was taken after the discovery of a consignment of weapons hidden in a cement cargo was discovered by pure chance in the port of Jaffa. According to later historical reconstructions¹³¹, the weapons originated from Belgium, sent by an unknown exporter, and were destined for the Haganah. For al-Qassam, that chance discovery provided the proof that there was no more space for a political solution to relations between the Palestinians, the Jews and the British. According to the brigand-shaykh, it was necessary to choose an armed jihad. The period of armed struggle, however, does not last long. Barely a few days. After having gone into hiding, shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam is immediately sought by the British, who kill him in an ambush.

His funerals became an event: a test of the strength of disaffection amongst the population, and a demonstration of just how popular al-Qassam’s ideas had become, beyond and despite the politics of Palestinian notables. In Haifa, people attend the funeral in their thousands, in a signal of what would happen just a few short months later, with the outbreak of the ‘Great Revolt’ proper. Barely five days pass from shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam’s death, that some Arab parties demand from the High Commissioner a

¹²⁹ Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 94.

¹³⁰ Shai Lachman, “Arab Rebellion and Terrorism in Palestine 1929-39: The Case of Shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam and His Movement”, in Elie Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (eds.) *Zionism and Arabism in Palestine and Israel*, Frank Cass, London 1982, p. 67; Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, Schocken, New York, 2003, pp. 505-511.

¹³¹ Weldon C. Matthews, *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation*, IB Tauris, London 2006, p. 237.

memorandum to stop Jewish immigration, which in 1935 had reached its peak with over 60,000 arrivals in a single year. After the forty days of mourning, Haifa witnesses another demonstration in al-Qassam's memory, which becomes a trial of strength for those nationalists who are less closely linked to the traditional centers of Palestinian power. The tension shows no signs of abating, the seeds of revolt have already been sown, and the spring of 1936 witnesses the explosion of the most important Arab insurrection, the *Thawra*. This revolt does not stop at clashes with the British and with the Yishuv, but displays an important dimension which is entirely internal to Palestinian society, a social conflict which borders on civil war. The conflict has gone down in history as the symbolic clash between the *kefiah* and the *tarboush*, between the campaign's all-white head cover – not the chequered version as it is known today – and the *fez* the Ottoman administration had introduced and which had come to symbolize urban modernity. Back then, the *kefiah* was not just the national symbol, but also the “symptom of antagonism against privileged urban notables”.¹³² This was an antagonism which shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam had helped emerge thanks to his proselytism in the Galilee countryside.

A constant pilgrimage begins just after the burial of the shaykh's remains in Balad al-Shaykh, on the city's outskirts, where a large marble tombstone marked his grave. The pilgrimage continues uninterrupted until 1948, when the five thousand inhabitants of Balad al-Shaykh are forced to flee during the Palestinian *Nakba* (Israel's War of Independence) and in time the village becomes part of the new Israeli municipality of Neshet.

Shaykh al-Qassam is a legendary figure whose stature and significance goes beyond his ideological and religious stances. The shaykh of the *Masjid Al-Istiqlal*, the Independence Mosque, is the hero of the nationalist revolt against British colonialism and against the Zionist project. He is the man who takes up arms without waiting for, and if necessary in opposition to the decisions of politicians, against their machinations, against the establishment – in a word, against Palestinian notables. Thus, before ever being ‘recruited’ by Islamist mythology, Qassam is part of the national heritage for all Palestinians, an archetype of a nationalist hero. It is no coincidence that Communiqué Number 2 during the First Intifada, published on January 13th, 1988, begins by addressing the “masses of our great people. A people of martyrs, nephews of al-Qassam. Brothers and companions of Abu Sharar, Khaled Nazal and Kanafani. People of the Revolt, which is taking strength from the roots of our homeland since 1936”.¹³³ Qassam is also the symbol of the revolt against the politics of compromise followed by the notables – he is therefore also the symbol of a revolt which bypasses the elites' own strategies. As Elias Sanbar, Palestinian historian and intellectual, and for years the life force behind the *Revue des Etudes Palestiniennes*, recalls: “Before adopting the name ‘Fatah’, the idea of calling the military wing of the movement ‘Al-Qassamiyyun’ was also considered” because the militants saw their movement as a rupture with respect to the historical

¹³² Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt. The 1936-39 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1995, p. 33. On the Arab Revolt, also see Tom Segev, *One Palestine, complete. Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate*, Henry Holt & Co., New York 2000, pp. 361-374.

¹³³ Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman (eds.) *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation*, MERIP, Washington 1989, p. 329.

process.¹³⁴ *Qassamiyyun*, or *Ikhwan al-Qassam*, the Brothers of Qassam, was also the name of those brothers in arms who had followed the brigand-shaykh in his choice of an armed struggle and later of going underground, becoming – for at least some of them – protagonists of what would later be called the *Thawra*, the Arab Revolt of 1936.

Hamas, therefore, does not immediately appropriate the figure of shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam. It does so during the First Intifada, when it embraces the myth wholeheartedly, emphasizing that the Arab Revolt of 1936-39, the most important of the Mandate period, was an *armed* revolt, just as the brigades Hamas establishes at the beginning of the Nineties to oppose the Israelis, the *Kata'eb al-Qassam*, are *armed*. Hamas' founding Charter, for example, says in Article 7 that “the Islamic Resistance Movement is a link in the chain of *jihad* against the Zionist occupation. It is tied to the initiation of the *jihad* by the martyr Izz al-Din al-Qassam and his *mujahid* brothers in 1936”¹³⁵. In this context, the reason why Izz al-Din al-Qassam becomes a model for Hamas becomes clear. His religious background, his commitment as a preacher, his nationalism, his transition towards armed struggle, for the Islamist movement these go to the heart of its two ideological and cultural pillars: loyalty to the religious message and national struggle, alongside an attention to the poorer social groups which Izz al-Din al-Qassam had always shown, and which were not, on the contrary, the basis of notables' consent. There is, in other words, a connection between al-Qassam's followers who came from the poorer parts of the Palestinian countryside, and Hamas' close relationship with those places where the weaker sectors of Palestinian society – from villages to refugee camps – are found.¹³⁶

This emphasis on the mythology linked to the brigand-shaykh also means that the historical role of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood came to be de-emphasized, despite the fact that the Egyptian *Ikhwan* had itself taken up arms both against its own British Protectorate and in aid of the Palestinians. Both Egyptian and Syrian Muslim Brothers, albeit with a few hundred men, took part in the 1948 war: this participation was so widely publicized that at the time it became one of the principal reasons for the consensus gathered by the Brotherhood, particularly in Gaza amongst the refugees. Indeed, the choice of armed resistance originates in Cairo, through the influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood upon the birth of the *Ikhwan*'s Palestinian branch. Hassan al-Banna begins to take an interest in *Ikhwan*'s infiltration within army ranks already in 1936, setting himself two specific objectives: first, the liberation of Egypt from British occupation and secondly the prevention of the birth of a Jewish state in Palestine. According to scholars, the first cell of Muslim Brotherhood officers dates to 1943-44, when the Second World War is in full swing.¹³⁷ It is from this ‘Special Section’ of the

¹³⁴ Elias Sanbar, “Izz al Din al Qassam, un homme d'humanité. Remarques préliminaires à une recherche sur le mouvement de Shaykh Izz al Din al Qassam”, in Hisham Nashabe (ed.) *Studia Palestina. Studies in honour of Constantine K. Zurayk*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut 1988, pp. 52-68.

¹³⁵ Hamas Charter in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit., p.271.

¹³⁶ It is not a coincidence that during Ramadan 2001 the Hizbullah Lebanese Islamist movement's TV station should have produced and broadcast a period drama based on Izz al-Din al-Qassam, addressing it to its Palestinian audience. The four-part series was entitled *Izz al-Din al-Qassam: Qisat al-jihad wa al-muqawam Izz al Din al-Qassam: a story of jihad and of resistance*. Cf. Olfa Lamloun, “Le Hezbollah au miroir de ses medias”, in Sabrina Mervin (ed.) *Le Hezbollah. État des lieux*, Actes Sud, Arles 2008, p. 39.

¹³⁷ Abd el-Fattah Muhammad al-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question 1928-1947*, I.B. Tauris, London 1998 p. 120.

Egyptian *Ikhwan*, that had trained on the Muqattam plains near Cairo, that the battalion which leaves for Palestine is selected, to take part in the First Arab-Israeli War in 1948.¹³⁸

The history of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, however, sharply diverges from its counterparts' between 1948 and 1983, effectively distancing itself from the endorsement of armed struggle. This choice, to which exceptions were made only in a few episodes during the 1967 war, was probably also at the origin of the break between, on the one hand, two leaders who would later become among the most prominent within Fatah, namely Abu Jihad and Abu Iyad, and on the other hand the Muslim Brotherhood to which they then belonged. The difference in approach became clear between 1956 and 1957, when for a brief period during the Egyptian protectorate, Israel occupied Gaza. Some within the *Ikhwan* – Abu Jihad included – formed an armed cell, but the Muslim Brotherhood rejected the idea of directly confronting the Israelis, causing the group of militants to “a separate organization -- a movement that would have no visible Islamic coloration and that would have its goal of liberating all Palestine through armed struggle”.¹³⁹ This was the embryo of what would become Fatah.

It is for this reason Hamas cannot trace its own models for armed struggle in the Muslim Brotherhood, and is therefore forced to go back in time to the myth of Izz al-Din al-Qassam in order to present its own archetypes of ‘resistance’ to the general public. However, the ‘myth’ goes beyond the historical genealogy which Hamas attempts to establish between the ‘Qassamite’ armed groups which emerged at the time of the brigand-shaykh and the armed groups born in the period after Israel’s birth in 1948. The citations which recall al-Qassam become evident when Hamas decides to make the jump from an armed struggle against military objectives to what might be called its own ‘strategy of tension’¹⁴⁰ during the mid-Nineties, namely suicide attacks inside Israel. The use of references to shaykh al-Qassam is clear from the very first suicide attacks Hamas carries out, namely the bombings which the Islamist movement decides to undertake in 1994 as a response to and reprisal against the massacre carried out inside the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron on February 25th of that year by right-wing Israeli extremist Baruch Goldstein. Paradoxically, *a contrario*, traces of the brigand-shaykh can be found within the mosque massacre itself, when Goldstein opens fire on the faithful at prayer during Ramadan, killing twenty-nine people: the extremist Israeli movement Kach to which Goldstein belonged had profaned al-Qassam’s tomb in Balad al-Shaykh in December of 1993, just a few months before the Hebron massacre.¹⁴¹ Amer Salah Amarnah, the twenty-two-year-old suicide bomber who carries out one of the attacks following the

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 117

¹³⁹ Alastair Croke, “From Rebel Movement to Political Party: the Case of the Islamic Resistance Movement”, *Conflict Forum Briefing Paper*, n. 3, 2007, p. 3. Available at <http://conflictsforum.org/2007/from-rebel-movement-to-political-party-the-case-of-the-islamic-resistance-movement/>.

¹⁴⁰ The name "strategy of tension" (*strategia della tensione*, in Italian) indicates the period roughly from 1969 to the beginning of the Eighties, when Italy was hit by a series of terrorist bombings, many of them authored by right-wing extremists in connection with some elements from the Italian intelligence services. Some of the terrorist bombings, from the attack in Banca dell'Agricoltura in Milan, in 1969, until the bombing of the Bologna train station in 1980, caused large numbers of civilian deaths.

¹⁴¹ Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt. The 1936-39 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, op. cit., p. 201.

Hebron massacre which Hamas claimed responsibility for – the attack in Hadera on April 13th, 1994 – is originally from the village of Ya’bad, in the Jenin area. This does not appear to be a coincidence, as it is precisely in the Ya’bad forest, on November 19th, 1935, that Izz al-Din al-Qassam is killed by British forces. Violence returns to the heart of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, this time no longer under the guise of war, nor with hijackings over European skies, nor even with the stones of the First Intifada, but with a devastating weapon: suicide attacks.

Tracing Baruch’s footsteps

In the Middle East, and in Israel and Palestine in particular, dates are important. They are like tombstones marking an infinite history of loss. They are also milestones carving out different narratives: dates, in the two different, parallel, intertwined historical trajectories, describe their time, their responsibilities, and others’ guilt. If on the Israeli side the chronology of suicide attacks is an integral part of the attitude towards armed Palestinian factions, on the other side there is one day which will never be forgotten – and not just by Hamas militants. It is February 25th, 1994, during Ramadan: the final Friday of what form Muslims is the most sacred month. In Hebron, as in Jerusalem, the number of faithful who gather in mosques increases during this period: some say there were eight hundred on that morning, when a radical settler, Baruch Goldstein, opened fire with his Galil automatic rifle inside the Ibrahimi Mosque, the most sacred after the ones on the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. It was said at the time that he fired at least a hundred bullets. On the ground after it was all over there were twenty-nine dead amongst the faithful, a far higher number of injured, and Goldstein himself killed by the beating inflicted by the crowd.

That February 25th of 1994, which went down in history as the Hebron Massacre, is also considered by Palestinian accounts as a watershed for Hamas. The Islamist movement claims responsibility for its first suicide attack, in Afula, in Northern Israel exactly forty days after the massacre carried out by Baruch Goldstein. In the Arab and Muslim world, the mourning period lasts precisely until the fortieth day, when the deceased are remembered at a family gathering which closes the period of grief. In the reconstruction later offered by Hamas militants, it is the Hebron Massacre which leads the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* to conclude that terrorism should become the principal instrument of the struggle against Israel. A struggle without quarter, in which civilians would not be spared, just as Goldstein had targeted civilians – what is more in a holy place, during Islam’s holiest month – to carry out the folly of his political act.

The Israeli government’s condemnation of the terrorist attack carried out by the extremist Kach movement militant – a Brooklyn-born doctor – is not enough to stop Hamas. The Islamist movement considers the mosque massacre – a mosque within which the remains of Abraham himself are preserved – a point of no return. The government’s condemnation is perceived by Palestinians as only one side of the coin, the other side of which is the funeral procession which accompanies Goldstein from Jerusalem to the radical settlement of Kiryat Arba, near Hebron. Palestinians witness hundreds of settlers gathering around Goldstein’s tomb hailing him as a hero, and they know that on the tombstone – in Kiryat Arba’s park, which is dedicated to Meir Kahane, the rabbi who

founded the Kach movement – Baruch Goldstein is called a “saint”, a man “killed to sanctify God’s name”.¹⁴² Palestinians also know that the more extremist among the settlers trace an analogy between Goldstein’s act Samson’s Biblical gesture, dying in the act of destroying the temple of the Philistines. The precedent of political suicide is also hinted at by Moussa Abu Marzouq, currently second in command in Hamas’ political office abroad, when, in an interview with *Time Magazine* in 2002, while the Second Intifada’s bloodiest wave of suicide attacks was taking place, said that “Hamas was actually not the first group to resort to these operations. Israel began these operations when the Israeli terrorist [Baruch] Goldstein dashed to al-Khalil Mosque and killed 27 [*sic*] people there while they were praying inside the mosque”.¹⁴³

Many years later, shaykh Ahmed Haj Ali argued that “Had there not been the 1994 Ibrahimi mosque massacre, there would have been no suicide bombings”¹⁴⁴. Haj Ali, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West Bank, born in 1941, was elected by a landslide in Nablus in the January 2006 Palestinian general elections on the Change and Reform ticket while held in an Israeli prison under administrative detention. He is not alone in making this point. In an interview dating back to 1998, and therefore preceding the emergence of a political line which later aimed to soothe the West, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, one of Hamas’ most radical leaders, said that suicide attacks “began after the massacre committed by the terrorist Baruch Goldstein [in the Hebron mosque in 1994] and intensified after the assassination of Yahya Ayyash”.¹⁴⁵ All the leaders who were asked what the massacre at the Ibrahimi Mosque represented gave the same answer: the massacre Goldstein carried out was a turning point in determining the choice of an armed strategy. Osama Hamdan, Hamas’ representative in Lebanon, states that “before the Hebron massacre armed operations had soldiers and settlers as targets” and goes so far as to claim that “the Israeli authorities had at the very least been informed of what was about to happen” by radicals among the Israeli settlers.¹⁴⁶ Ahmed Youssef, one of the most moderate leaders within Gaza, echoes this position, arguing that “history would have been different had Hebron not happened – a real crime against humanity. Without Hebron, Hamas would not have been able to justify suicide attacks”.¹⁴⁷ According to this interpretation, the use of suicide attacks was a sort of retaliation in kind, an equal and opposite measure, to the actions carried out by one man, Baruch Goldstein, who when he entered the Ibrahimi Mosque knew full well that he would not have left it alive, and that he would have sacrificed himself in a suicide which was as insane as it was political. A similar interpretation is also offered by Ismail Abu Shanab, one of the main figures in the negotiations which lead to the truce of June 2003, later killed by the Israelis after a suicide attack – one of the bloodiest – in Jerusalem the following August. Abu Shanab told the experts of the International Crisis Group that the Hebron massacre “did not leave

¹⁴² For a description of Baruch Goldstein by the more radical Israeli fringes, it is also possible to consult the site http://www.jonathan5742.com/Right_Wing_Zionist_Homepage/Kahane.htm.

¹⁴³ “Defining Terrorism”, interview with Moussa Abu Marzouq by George Baghdadi, *Time Magazine*, April 8th, 2002.

¹⁴⁴ International Crisis Group, “Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration”, *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 49, 18 January 2006, p.2.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi published on *Kul al-Arab*, 9 January 1998, in English at <http://www.jmcc.org/media/report/98/Jan/3b.htm>.

¹⁴⁶ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Author’s interview with Ahmed Youssef, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

us any choice. They attacked us at our weakest point, so we had to do the same in return. We did not want this kind of struggle, but were left with no choice”¹⁴⁸.

The reading Hamas offers of the massacre in the Hebron mosque is, therefore, unambiguous. And it is indeed after the massacre that the Islamist movement begins to recruit groups of youngsters unknown to Israeli authorities, youngsters who had not been arrested or stopped by the police, who were untraceable in the dossiers on Palestinians, and who would carry out what – according to the dominant philosophy within certain sectors of Hamas – had become a *martyrdom*, thereby becoming *shaheed*. According to Beverly Milton-Edwards, this philosophy of martyrdom through which Hamas “elevated the act of jihad in the aftermath of Goldstein’s Jewish equivalent”.¹⁴⁹ In this sense, the dimension of this act, this decision to blow oneself up thereby causing death and destruction around them, is not simply offensive, “jihad is, in this context, an act of defence, the suicide bombings are a retaliation against an aggression”.¹⁵⁰ According to Milton-Edwards, this is because the legitimization of the attacks is found in a verse of the Qur’an exhorting the faithful to “fight in the way of God those who fight with you... And slay them wherever you come upon them, and expel them from where they expelled you”.¹⁵¹ In the same interview to *Time* magazine cited earlier, Abu Marzouq had also offered a kind of periodization of Hamas’ armed struggle: the first two years, until 1989, without resorting to military operations; then, until 1993, clashes with “light arms against Israeli soldiers”, operations defined by the then head of the political office as a “popular demand” in order to react to the killing of the boys during the Revolt, the youth who threw the stones of 1987. Then, when the Israelis began to “face Palestinian civilians with weapons [...]we could have done nothing but to answer with the same weapon”.¹⁵² An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

However, reprisals and revenge do not stop at the first suicide attack. Nor at the second. Within a brief space of time, the reprisal mutates into a ‘strategy of tension’ aiming to inflict as much damage as possible upon the emerging peace process and the Declaration of Principles by Rabin’s Israel and Arafat’s Palestine. The Hebron massacre becomes secondary in the legitimization of the use of suicide attacks, to the point that Hamas no longer speaks of revenge, of civilians killed by the same token that Baruch Goldstein killed civilians. There is no longer talk of a symmetrical reaction to the crimes committed by Israel against Palestinian civilians or of a classic ‘eye for an eye’ logic. The justifications Hamas uses change: in order to legitimize indiscriminate attacks inside Israeli cities – in cafes, in buses, and at crowded crossroads – Hamas begins to argue that Israeli society is militarized, on the basis that it is a society within which everyone undertakes military service and remain reservists at least until they are forty. Hamas thus stretches the concept of a ‘soldier’ and therefore of a combatant so that the victims of suicide attacks are no longer civilians, in a move designed to legitimize its continue use of terrorism as an instrument. This trajectory by some within Hamas appears to confirm what some of the most pragmatic leaders have said, namely that it is not at all clear that

¹⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, “Dealing with Hamas”, *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 21, 26 January 2004, p.16.

¹⁴⁹ Beverly Milton-Edwards, “Factors behind Hamas bombings”, *Middle East International*, August 1995, pp. 18-19.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² “Defining Terrorism”, interview with Moussa Abu Marzouq by George Baghdadi, *op. cit.*

all of the leadership agreed with suicide attacks, at least from an ethical and political point of view. One of the longest-running leaders in Gaza, Sayyed Abu Musameh, has stated that he “did not support the suicide attacks” and that already “in 1990 there was an internal document in which he stated his opposition to violence perpetrated against civilians and against Arab soldiers”. This is also confirmed by Ahmed Youssef, who wrote to the leadership of the Islamist movement in 1998, advising that suicide operations should be stopped, and that given the reactions these had triggered around the world, another method of opposing the Israelis should be found.¹⁵³

Negotiations to suspend the suicide attacks would achieve of some temporary successes, particularly within the Palestinian world, but these periods of calm which were neither written nor publicized if not after they had been broken by a new attack were, however, always temporary. An unwritten calm, for example, had been obtained by the PNA in the months prior to the first Palestinian elections, from September 1995. These were months during which Hamas was even discussing whether it should be taking part in the elections inside the territory under the Palestinian National Authority’s as yet embryonic control, and the very same months in which the Islamist movement was establishing a fully-fledged party, the Al-Khalas experiment. This unwritten calm was broken on January 5th, 1996, by the targeted assassination of Yahya Ayyash, ‘The Engineer’, because Israel had always wanted to maintain the freedom to act, striking against the instigators of the suicide attacks even if it meant that on some occasions diplomatic possibilities would be sacrificed on the altar of a military solution to the terrorist threat. Ayyash’s case is exemplary in this sense: he was the organizer of numerous suicide attacks, and as such Shimon Peres’ government preferred to eliminate him, despite being able to conceivably foresee that his assassination would trigger a response from Hamas’ military wing, particularly at a very delicate time when the Islamist movement was engaged in animated discussions over participation in elections.

The main question, which has not yet been met with a definitive answer at a historical and a political level, concerns what kinds of relations there might have been between the political and military wings within Hamas. After all, the Islamist movement was born, on December 9th, 1987, under a specific banner which explained its objectives and *modus operandi*: ‘Islamic Resistance Movement’. The ‘resistance’ is the core around which Hamas revolves, even before its formal birth. Both times shaykh Ahmed Yassin is arrested, before and after 1987, he is imprisoned because he is implicated with the organization of armed groups. However, things appear to change after the re-organization carried out by Abu Marzouq in 1989, the year after which political leaders tend to increasingly emphasize – at least in their official declarations – the separation between political and military wings, between Hamas as an Islamist movement, and the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. This is what Fatah would also later do, during the Second Intifada, with the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade – an armed but independent group. However, the key question remains unresolved, just as the relationship between Sinn Fein and the IRA at the apex of the Troubles remained unresolved – at least as far as the details of organizational structures and internal communications were concerned. Or indeed the relationship between Herri Batasuna and ETA in the Basque Country, or between certain African liberation movements and their own armed wings.

¹⁵³ Author’s interview with Ahmed Youssef, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

In brief: how much does Hamas' political wing know about the military wing's plans? All the political leaders insist on the point that they did not know anything concerning the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade's plans. This would suggest a degree of autonomy rooted in the very clandestine organizational structure around which Hamas is constructed. If known leaders, who have a public profile, knew of the military wing's plans, it would obviously be easier to obtain from them the information necessary to prevent the attacks, since they are not in hiding. It is not a coincidence that over the years little more has been known of military commanders save their names – second- if not third-hand information mixed in with other urban myths surrounding the figure of the guerrilla fighter. There are indiscretions concerning the more recent leaders, such as Muhammad al-Deif or Ahmed al-Ja'bari, journalistic scoops which arise from time to time when journalists manage to get a tour to the sites from which Qassam rockets are fired from Gaza against southern Israeli cities, or when they manage to meet a militant or even a commander. Nonetheless, the veneer of secrecy remains intact, to the detriment of an image of the Islamist movement which remains confused.

The umbilical cord with that central word in Hamas' definition – 'resistance' – has never been severed. According to Islamist leaders, this is because the Israeli occupation is not over. In this sense, the Islamist movement cannot achieve a fully post-conflict posture so long as the conflict itself endures. All the while, the question concerning the real relationship between Hamas' two wings remains unresolved. One thing is certain, however, and that is that the political wing has never disowned the military wing, even during the harshest phase of the suicide attack strategy, even when the embarrassment of certain political leaders in taking responsibility for some of those attacks at particular historical junctures was evident.¹⁵⁴ The unspoken agreement, therefore, appears to be that the political wing should never and can never disown the military wing. In psychoanalytical terms, Eyad al-Sarraj made this point with regard to Hamas' structure, that it acts according to the classical rules of tribalism, closing ranks at moments it considers vital.

The question that follows from this is therefore: what freedom of action has the military wing had over the two decades of Hamas' existence? The latitude it has had has certainly been significant, especially at certain specific moments. This independence has strongly influenced the course of events, such as during the terrible months of the spring of 1996, for example, which were punctuated by a series of bloody suicide attacks. The later phase, after Hamas had undertaken the path of electoral participation, was similarly marked by the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit in June 2006 just as negotiations between Mahmoud Abbas and the Hamas-led government were in full swing, not to mention Hamas' armed takeover of the Gaza Strip, exactly a year later. Aside from the attack against the commercial district of Dimona in February 2008, which was believed by the Israelis themselves to have been carried out by splinter groups, the commitment which had been made by the Islamist movement at the beginning of 2005 to end the series of terrorist attacks has been adhered to by the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Once that particular 'strategy of tension' was over, Hamas' armed wing appears to have restricted itself to a 'classic' military posture, so to speak, or at least to one rooted in conventional guerrilla tactics. Specifically, it resorted to two elements: the launch of Qassam rockets,

¹⁵⁴ Shaul Mishal, "The Pragmatic Dimension of the Palestinian Hamas", *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 29, n. 4, summer 2003, p. 583.

and the establishment of the Executive Force as a fully-fledged military body. The *tanfisiyya*, which had been established in Gaza during April 2006 by the then Hamas government Interior Minister Said Siyyam, did not limit itself to being a counterpart to the forces set up by Fatah and by the PNA Presidency, but has increasingly become a military organization, with its three thousand-strong force doubling its numbers within the following two years.

The Lost Generation

The years of violent conflict during which Hamas struck at the heart of Israeli cities also created another target, an entirely Palestinian one, namely the gradualist policies pursued by Yasser Arafat with respect to the Peace Process. Abu Ammar knows this well, and reacts with an iron fist. In Gaza, Muhammad Dahlan is charged with making the arrests, carrying out about two thousand of them against Hamas members, becoming from then on the figure most hated by the Islamist movement's militants.¹⁵⁵ The choice of repression is implemented in particular after the last wave of suicide attacks carried out during the summer and the autumn of 1997, under a Netanyahu government which by then was well-established. The round-ups carried out against Islamist militants during 1997-98 are remembered by Hamas' political leaders as one of the reasons why the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* put a stop to suicide attacks until the new – and extremely sad – phase of the devastating attacks of 2001-2004, while the Second Intifada was in full swing. In truth, there are also those who speak of an undeclared agreement between the Islamist leadership and the National Authority, until 2001, to restrict Hamas' operations to the Occupied Territory, suspending attacks inside Israel.¹⁵⁶ After his return to the Strip, it is Yassin himself who, on October 19th, 1997, proposes a period of calm. In exchange, Israel would have had to suspend military repression and economic sanctions – conditions which Israel never stuck by. Hamas, however, decided to continue its undeclared unilateral truce not so much with Israel as with Arafat, breaking it off only once it threw itself fully behind the Second Intifada, many months after the revolt triggered by Ariel Sharon's visit to the *al-Haram al-Sharif* on September 29th, 2000, under the protection of a thousand police officers. Indeed, Hamas' entry into the Second Intifada dates to the spring of 2001, after Ariel Sharon's victory at the polls which mark Ehud Barak's political as well as electoral defeat, and after a ratcheting up of Tsahal's repression against demonstrations in the West Bank and in Gaza, which brought Palestinian victims to over three hundred in the space of five months. On March 4th, 2001, in Netanya, a man blows himself up in Herzl Road, at the heart of the coastal city: three people die along with the suicide bomber, and dozens are injured. At the same time,

¹⁵⁵ As Muhammad Dahlan himself says in an interview with investigative journalist David Rose, author of the most significant inquiry into the Bush Administration plans to trigger a civil war amongst Palestinians after the Hamas electoral victory of 2006: “. “Arafat had decided to arrest Hamas military leaders, because they were working against his interests, against the peace process, against the Israeli withdrawal, against everything. [...] He asked the security services to do their job, and I have done that job”, admitting that it was not a “popular work”. For many years, Hamas said that the forces lead by Dahlan routinely tortured detainees. In David Rose, “The Gaza Bombshell”, in *Vanity Fair*, April 2008.

¹⁵⁶ Dia'a Rashwan, *The Spectrum of Islamist Movements*, op. cit.; Helga Baumgarten, *Hamas: Der politische Islam in Palästina*, Diederichs Verlag, Berlin, 2006, p. 129.

that Sunday, Ariel Sharon is in the process of securing a majority for his government in the Knesset. Hamas does not claim the attack immediately, but the previous day the military wing had let it be known in a declaration that it would resume attacks, and that ten suicide bombers were ready to blow themselves up.

According to experts, Hamas' entry into the Second Intifada is therefore late. Graham Usher, among the journalists who knows Palestinian matters best, writes that "For four months, the temper, tactics and imagery of the revolt were dictated largely by Fatah, especially by its vanguard *tanzim* 'organization' led by the now imprisoned Marwan Barghouti. Hamas only fully entered the fray with the February 2001 election of Ariel Sharon as Israel's prime minister and in response to his vow to bring security to his people 'within 100 days'".¹⁵⁷ It is only after Sharon's victory, therefore, that Hamas, "with a nod from the *tanzim*, took the qualitative turn to suicide bombings in Israel as the uprising's signature and most lethal weapon".¹⁵⁸ The Islamist movement, however, rejects this interpretation. Farha As'ad, who acted as coordinator for the activities connected to the Second Intifada on Hamas' behalf, tells a different story: "three days after the beginning of the Intifada, we held a meeting among the representatives of the different factions. Marwan Barghouti for Fatah and Ahmed Saadat representing the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were also present. It was a extremely intense meeting, lasting several days".¹⁵⁹ This means, still according to As'ad, that Hamas was present from the very beginning, although it took some time to piece together an effective operational structure – "at least two or three months in order to re-organize"¹⁶⁰ – since Yasser Arafat's security forces had incarcerated a considerable portion of the movement's leadership. In order to strengthen Hamas' interpretation of these events, Farhat As'ad also explains that "most of the demonstrations were organized by us, and our people were present, although the other factions had asked us not to display Hamas' green banners".¹⁶¹ On the contrary, the Islamist movement, say its leaders, was the only one to call on Palestinians to resist Ariel Sharon's visit to *al-Haram al-Sharif* before it took place.¹⁶² In truth, Sharon's famous stroll near the Al-Aqsa Mosque on September 29th, 2000, indeed took place at the end of a lengthy period in which tempers had overheated on the question of a possible Israeli sovereignty over the Holy Mosques, as well as the activism of radical Israeli fringe groups such as those encompassed under the umbrella of the Temple Mount Faithful movement.

If the question of Hamas' immediate participation in the Second Intifada remains controversial, this cannot also be said concerning the doubts that the Islamist movement had concerning Yasser Arafat's true objectives in riding at least the early incidents which would later given rise to the Al-Aqsa Revolt. As Osama Hamdan recalls, "Abu Ammar thought that in this way he could exert pressure on Ehud Barak. The question we asked ourselves was the following: if Arafat wants to use the Intifada for the same objective, namely the implementation of the Oslo Accords, what should Hamas do? Participate or

¹⁵⁷ Graham Usher, "The New Hamas: Between Resistance and Participation", in *Middle East Report*, August 21st, 2005, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero082105.html>

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Author's interview with Farhat As'ad Ramallah, October 15th, 2008.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Author's interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

abstain?”¹⁶³ For months, Hamas debated how best to take part in the Intifada – about whether, in short, it should resume terrorist attacks. The Palestinian ‘street’ and political observers both kept their attention fixed on the military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, asking why they had not yet taken part in the Al-Aqsa Revolt. The scales would eventually tip in the hardliners’ favor, mirroring what other factions were already doing. This triggers a vicious circle of suicide attacks and targeted assassinations between the spring of 2001 and all the way through 2002. In this fire a new generation of very young militants is forged, a generation which takes part in the Second Intifada under different flags: Fatah’s yellow banner, Hamas’ green, the Popular Front’s red, or the Islamic Jihad’s black. But while the flag colors might be different, the streets across the West Bank and Gaza are the same, and the bond formed between young men of different political affiliations is the one upon which the post-Arafat political transition would later be built. Youth belonging to Fatah, to Hamas, to the Popular Front and to Islamic Jihad had fought together and died together. Going back to separate barricades is no longer possible, at least for part of Palestinian youth, which in this sense distances itself from the isolated citadel of politics, as the greatest Palestinian writer, Sahar Khalifah, recounts in her novel dedicated to the Second Intifada and to Nablus, *The End of Spring*.¹⁶⁴

And yet, paradoxically, it is precisely while the Second Intifada – one of the most tragic and violent pages of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on both sides – is still raging that an entirely political debate begins within Hamas on the question of its participation within the PNA. In parallel with hypothetical discussions of a truce with Israel.

Hudna, tahdi'ah, truces

Over the course of the first twenty years of its formal existence, Hamas has at various stages suggested to Israel not only temporary truces, but also *de facto* accepted the possibility of reaching agreements on the West Bank and on Gaza – that is to say on the Territory occupied in 1967. Such a move meant reconciling the never-renounced objective of re-taking the entirety of pre-1948 Palestine with the more pragmatic objective of accepting a Palestinian state within the lands conquered by Israel during the Six-Day War. Despite the ambiguities, all the movement’s political leaders, from Ahmed Yassin to Moussa Abu Marzouq, from Mahmoud A-Zahhar to Khaled Meshaal have accepted the 1967 borders, albeit without resolving the ambiguity not just on the *de facto* recognition of Israel, but also on the difference between a temporary solution and a definitive one, between a *hudna* and peace. Ever since the early years of its existence, Hamas refers to the concept of *hudna* in order to exit the impasse of a possible agreement with the Israelis, a clear and decisive appeal to an Islamic concept. With respect to the idea of *hudna*, Hamas’ historical and theological point of reference is the 628 C.E. Treaty of Hdaybiyya, the sixth year after the Hijra. Along with his followers, which tradition numbers around 1,400, Muhammad decided to undertake the so-called ‘Lesser Pilgrimage’ to Makkah, including the convention of being unarmed. Makkans, however, prevented Muhammad from completing the pilgrimage, forcing him to undertake lengthy negotiations which were eventually completed under a tree in Hdaybiyya, on the

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Sahar Khalifah, *The End of Spring*, Interlink Books, 2007.

caravan trail between Madina and Makkah, where respective ambassadors signed a ten-year truce. According to the text of the Treaty, “there will be no fighting for ten years in which people will be safe and stop from attacking one another. And amongst us what is vice should be prevented, and there shall be no theft or treachery”¹⁶⁵. The exhausting political debate between Hamas and the international community concentrates on breaking the *hudna* and on the significance of the truce for Muslims at the time of Hudaybiyya. The crux of the question is whether the *hudna* is a way for Hamas to strengthen itself during a period of weakness, in order to later return to attacking its enemy. Some say that Muhammad himself broke the Hudaybiyya truce, but in this case also interpretations differ. Islamologists say that neither Muhammad, the Muslims nor their allies broke the truce, but that after one year the truce was instead broken by the Banu Bakr tribe, which was connected to the Makkan aristocracy, the Quraysh tribe. Both the Banu Bakr and the Quraysh attacked the Banu Khuza’ah tribe, itself in turn linked to the Muslim side. Moreover, again according to scholars, the violation of the truce did not occur immediately, but after an exchange of letters and of envoys between Muhammad and the Quraysh tribe.

This is the *hudna* to which shaykh Ahmed Yassin refers in his numerous offers to Israel of a *hudna* for varying lengths of time, dating all the way back to 1993.¹⁶⁶ It is to that armistice, for example, that Moussa Abu Marzouq refers in 1995, outlining a possibility that would be reiterated to the international community particularly from the Second Intifada onwards, including the offers which Hamas leaders would make after their ascent to power in 2006. The then head of the political office had told Khaled Hroub that there was “a way of accepting an interim solution that is consistent with the *shari’a*, namely an armistice (*hudna*). This differs from a peace agreement in that the armistice has a set duration, and it does not require acceptance of the usurpation of [our] rights by the enemy”.¹⁶⁷ As Professor Shaul Mishal, the greatest Israeli expert on Hamas, has written: “by interpreting any political agreement involving the West Bank and Gaza Strip as merely a pause on the historic road of jihad, Hamas achieved political flexibility without forsaking its ideological credibility”.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, “having adopted the strategy of a temporary settlement, Hamas was ready to acquiesce in the 1993 Oslo process without recognizing Israel; to support the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip without ending the state of war or renouncing its ultimate goals; and to consider restraint, but not to give up the armed struggle”. According to Mishal, “a political settlement in the short run was interpreted as being complementary, not contradictory, to long-term desires”.¹⁶⁹

In what was the apex of the Second Intifada, the ‘spring of fire’ of 2002, Israeli cities were scarred by dozens of suicide attacks in the space of two months and undertaken by all Palestinian armed factions, while some of the most important Palestinian cities such as Jenin and Nablus were devastated by Operation Defensive

¹⁶⁵ Mustafa Abu Sway, “The Concept of Hudna (Truce) in Islamic Sources”, August 6th, 2006, Passia Religious Unit, at <http://www.passia.org/meetings/2006/Hudna.htm>.

¹⁶⁶ Alastair Crooke, “From Rebel Movement to Political Party: the Case of the Islamic Resistance Movement”, *op. cit.* p. 6.

¹⁶⁷ Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, *op. cit.*, p. 75. The interview is dated 21 April 1995.

¹⁶⁸ Shaul Mishal, *The Pragmatic Dimension of the Palestinian Hamas*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Shield. It is at this point that the third ranking member of the Hamas *Nomenklatura*, Ismail Abu Shanab, makes Israel an offer, and chooses a very specific platform to do this: an interview with an American newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The year 2002 is the harshest phase of the Second Intifada. After generations which fought wars upon wars, Abu Shanab tells Robert Plotkin, “now there is a generation which needs to live in peace, without worrying about its safety”.¹⁷⁰ Abu Shanab, born in 1950, is talking about the generations of leaders born in Gaza’s refugee camps: their idea is to delay talk of ‘historical issues’, to “speak [instead] of historical Palestine, and practical reality”, bearing in mind that “when Palestinians and Israelis live among each other in peace, they may cooperate with each other in a way that everyone will be satisfied”.¹⁷¹ This offer was in line with other proposals made in previous years by shaykh Yassin, but that in 2002 take on far greater significance, because they are made immediately after the Arab League summit in Beirut. During the meeting, the then Saudi prince regent Abdullah presented a plan, later approved, in which he offered Ariel Sharon peace and security in exchange for land. Peace between the Arabs and Israel if Tel Aviv pulled back to the armistice lines of 1949, the so-called Green Line. Something shifts, despite the violence. Between 2001 and 2002, it appears that Hamas decides to adhere unilaterally to a de-escalation on at least three occasions. But it is in the summer of 2002 that a ceasefire by Palestinian factions comes closest – Hamas included, as it was then the group with the greatest ‘firepower’ – and this at the very same time when Yasser Arafat decides to place Ahmed Yassin under house arrest, after yet another wave of suicide attacks.

At the centre of negotiations is a man considered to be the best when it comes to establishing fruitful contacts with Islamist groups, both Palestinian and Lebanese. He is probably the European who knows Hamas and Hizbullah best, thanks to a thirty-year career in the British foreign intelligence service. Alistair Crooke was the MI6 man in Israel and in the Occupied Territory until he moved into ‘conflict resolution’ early this century, on the strength of an unquestionable competence in Middle Eastern matters. He contributes to the April 2002 report on the Second Intifada drawn up by US Senator George Mitchell. He acts as security consultant for Miguel Morantinos, then EU special envoy in the Middle East and later Spanish Foreign Minister, and he is one of the closest to the EU’s Javier Solana, ‘Mr. Foreign Policy’, on the Middle Eastern file. In that role, he ‘facilitates’ – to use the jargon – the truce of 2003.

The previous year, Alastair Crooke headed the European security team and contacted Palestinian factions in order to arrive at a unilateral ceasefire. A *tahdi’ah*, a period of calm in order to put an end above all to suicide attacks within Israeli cities. The EU consultant meets the men that count, including shaykh Yassin in Gaza¹⁷², and negotiations with Fatah and Hamas proceed at such a pace that a public announcement by all the factions of a cease-fire having been reached is imminent. Just a few more hours

¹⁷⁰ Robert Plotkin, “ Hamas would accept Saudi peace plan, spokesman says. Group would stop attacks on Israelis if occupation ends”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 28th, 2002. Available at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2002/04/28/MN222422.DTL>.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Parts of these conversations are published by Aaron Klein on WorldNetDaily, an American information website with clearly conservative ideological sympathies (“EU shocker: Hamas are ‘freedom fighters’. Official blamed terrorism on ‘Israeli occupation’ in secret meeting,” April 14th, 2005). Klein cites phrases taken from meeting minutes found in the PNA’s Preventive Security Forces in Gaza during an Israeli Army operation.

and the agreement would have been made public: Hamas had agreed to stop suicide attacks, as Fatah requested. On July 22nd, however, a one-ton bomb is dropped on the agreement, the full weight of the ordnance dropped by an Israeli F-16 fighter on a four-storey building in Al-Darj, an area in Gaza City, which contemporary reports describe as densely populated – just like the rest of the city. Fifteen people die, amongst which nine children and three women, while another one hundred and fifty-nine are injured. Objective of the ‘targeted assassination’ carried out by the Israeli air force is the head of Hamas’ military wing, Salah Shehadeh, who is among the fifteen victims alongside two bodyguards. According to the government in Tel Aviv, he had to be killed because he was “one of the founders of Hamas”, “directly responsible for having initiated and guided dozens of attacks carried out over the last two years, in which dozens of Israeli citizens were killed and hundreds wounded”.¹⁷³ The armed forces spokesperson’s communiqué adds that he was also “behind the financing of the laboratories for the production of Qassam rockets, and was personally involved in the purchase and manufacture of weapons”.¹⁷⁴ On what the press has for years called ‘collateral victims’, the armed forces declare that “had the information in their possession indicated the presence of civilian victims near Shehadeh, the timing or the methods of the operation would have been changed”.¹⁷⁵ But even within Israel the military’s explanations do not stop the outcry, so much so that a state commission is set up to investigate the targeted assassination, while abroad the requests to investigate Avi Dichter, then head of the Shin Bet, mount.

After the spectacular assassination of Salah Shehadeh, considered on top of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the agreement is called off, negotiations are suspended, and even champions of moderation towards the West and towards Israel such as Husni Mubarak publish statements the harshness of which can be understood only in the light of what would later come to be known publicly about the negotiations over a *tahdi’ah*. Shehadeh’s assassination, Mubarak said at the time, “shows the Israeli Prime Minister [Ariel Sharon] was probably not happy with these initiatives and said, ‘I will go ahead with this strike to sabotage these efforts’”.¹⁷⁶ At the same time, Mubarak is echoed by a good friend of the West in the Palestinian camp, Yasser Abed Rabbo, who repeats the same accusations on the pages of *Al-Hayat*: the massacre in Gaza City’s Al-Darj quarter is an act of sabotage against the agreement which was about to be signed, not least thanks to the joint efforts by the PNA, the Jordanians and the Saudis. In August, according to a poll conducted by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Research, Hamas overtakes Fatah in potential voters’ preference for the first time: it gains 27 percent of preferences, while Yasser Arafat’s party collapses from 32 to 26 percent compared to the preceding May.¹⁷⁷ Crooke’s own direct recollection is that once the *hudna* begins to be debated for the first

¹⁷³ Israeli armed forces spokesperson communiqué, August 2nd, 2002, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2002/Findings%20of%20the%20inquiry%20into%20the%20death%20of%20Salah%20Sh>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Husni Mubarak launch his verbal attack in Paris, after a meeting with French president Jacques Chirac. Various sources reported the sentence. Cfr., for example, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/mubarak-accuses-sharon-of-sabotaging-peace-initiative-649452.html>

¹⁷⁷ Palestinian Center for Policy and Research (PSR) Survey Research Unit: Public Opinion Poll n.5, 18-21 August 2002, <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2002/p5a.html#elections>.

time with the Egyptian leadership in Cairo in 2002, “ Hamas responded affirmatively to a query on whether they would agree to remove civilians from the conflict. This response was passed to both American officials and to Israel. After shuttling between American and a senior Israeli official in different locations in Cairo, the definition of who would be removed from the conflict was specified and a larger agreement to end violence targeting civilians seemed likely. However, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon rejected the proposal. In all, Hamas proposed to remove civilians from the conflict on three separate occasions. All three proposals were rejected by Israel”¹⁷⁸, nor were attempts made with Hamas to suspend suicide attacks by the then US President George W. Bush’s Administration in September 2002 met with greater success.

Nearly a year would have to go by in order for talk of *hudna* to re-start, albeit this time within a purely Palestinian agreement. The turning point comes in 2003, with the first *hudna* reached by Palestinian armed groups entering into force on June 29th. The architect of the June 2003 truce is without doubt Mahmoud Abbas, whom Yasser Arafat had designated Prime Minister a few short months previously. It is Abbas who attempts to include Hamas in negotiations because – according to sources within the Islamist movement itself – given that the bloodiest attacks had been carried out by the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*, its signature on the agreement would reduce Israeli civilian victims of the Intifada by 70 percent. An initial agreement with Hamas would then make an agreement with the armed group linked to Fatah, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade, easier to reach. The negotiations are difficult, and bloodstained for both sides. So much so that before the *hudna* can be reached, on June 9th, two Israeli helicopters try to assassinate Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi by firing seven missiles at his jeep. The Hamas leader is wounded, alongside one of his sons and another twenty-four people, while one of his bodyguards and a woman who was just passing by are killed. Barely forty-eight hours go by, and Hamas responds: a suicide attacker, disguised as an Orthodox Jew, gets on a number 14 bus and blows himself up half way down the Jaffa Road, the commercial centre of Jerusalem. Sixteen people are killed, about a hundred injured. At the end of June, on the 29th to be precise, Palestinian factions nonetheless agree on a cease-fire – a cease-fire which, however, does not last long, and is broken with no hope of being repaired when on August 21st Israel kills a Hamas leader with a missile. The target of the five missiles launched is Ismail Abu Shanab, the most moderate amongst the Hamas leadership, the very person who was in fact considered to have been the architect of the *hudna*, and even more importantly the one who, from the height of his position as third ranking member of the Hamas *Nomenklatura*, was the first to speak of the possibility of a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli state. Albeit no ‘dove’, Abu Shanab was pragmatic, and believed that the establishment of a Palestinian state was what his generation sought above all else, at that historical juncture. He had also stated that he could not foresee what future generations might seek, thus recalling the temporary nature of the decisions Hamas could take concerning Palestine, a *waqf* land, the land of Islam, and thus not merely a homeland. His death, according to the accounts of pragmatic leaders within Hamas, had a considerable effect on them. In a very different Gaza City from 2003, which a few months later would be targeted by Operation Cast Lead, Ahmed Youssef says “The day

¹⁷⁸ Alastair Crooke, “From Rebel Movement to Political Party: the Case of the Islamic Resistance Movement”, op. cit., p. 5.

before he had made a good public statement. I had called him on the telephone. I was still in the United States at the time”.¹⁷⁹

Israel reacts to the bloody attack a few days earlier in the heart of Jerusalem – between Road 1 and the Orthodox quarter of Mea Shearim, which claimed twenty-three dead including eighteen Israelis and five Americans, as well as about a hundred injured – by killing Abu Shanab. The suicide attack had been claimed by Islamic Jihad, but the attacker would later be identified as a Hamas member. This circumstance had forced Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi to admit responsibility for the attack, albeit defining it as an isolated incident, a reaction against the Israelis’ assassination of an Islamic Jihad leader. Three weeks later, the Israelis themselves would obtain confirmation that the attacker had acted alone, without having received an order from the Hamas leadership. He came from Hebron, just like the Islamic Jihad leader who had been assassinated just five days before the suicide attack in Jerusalem. The attack which took place in August 2003 also provided a push from within the European Union, to include Hamas in the list of terrorist organizations. Up until that moment, the political wing of the Islamist movement had been saved – so to speak – from the black list in which the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades had been included in 2002, alongside the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade, the Islamic Jihad, as well as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. With a decision taken on September 12th, 2003, the European Union’s Council under the Italian Presidency (Foreign Minister Franco Frattini signs the act) adds Hamas as a whole to the list of terrorist organizations. This inclusion, at this particular point, blocks any negotiated attempt by Javier Solana’s men – Alastair Crooke foremost among them – to arrive at a lasting ceasefire with the Islamist movement.

Ismail Abu Shanab’s assassination halts everything. The chain reaction of suicide attacks and Israeli retaliations re-starts: Hamas claims responsibility for two attacks carried out on the same day, September 9th, one against Israeli soldiers who were hitchhiking just outside the military base at Tzifin resulting in nine dead and thirty wounded, while the second took place in the heart of Jerusalem, in the well-off German Colony quarter, just opposite one of the best-known cafes in the area, the Café Hillel, in which seven people die and another fifty are wounded. The following day, the Israeli air force destroys the two-storey home of a Hamas leader, Mahmoud A-Zahhar, in the heart of one of Gaza City’s poorest quarters, Al-Sabra, the very same Ahmed Yassin lives in at the time. A-Zahhar, his wife and daughter are injured, alongside eighteen other people, while his son Khaled and one of his bodyguards are killed.

Behind the scenes, however, the doors have not been bolted shut: the channel for dialog aimed at overcoming internal divisions and most of all on deciding a common stance remains open within Palestinian politics. Indeed, this possibility for dialog remains open despite the PNA institutions being racked by yet another crisis. Having failed in its attempt to obtain stronger powers to reorganize and rationalize the maze of labels into which the security sector in the West Bank and in Gaza is divided, on September 6th Mahmoud Abbas resigns and is replaced by Ahmed Qureia. It is now Abu Ala – this is his *nom de guerre* – who is tasked with reconciling Palestinian politics. Or at least of trying to.

When, under Egyptian pressure, the twelve factions meet in Cairo in early December 2003, the main theme is still that of the *hudna*, as well as the question of the

¹⁷⁹ Author’s interview with Ahmed Youssef, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

relationship between Fatah and Hamas. It should be simply a question of internal Palestinian politics, but it quickly becomes clear that this is not the case. There is an unacknowledged presence: Israel. Invisible and unspoken its presence may be, but it is one whose influence is still clearly felt, especially at particular point during the proceedings, in some of the words spoken by members of the Egyptian intelligence services. Osama Hamdan recalls that “The Egyptians asked some very specific questions: what is the definition of civilians and of militants in the resistance. At that point, we understood that the questions had been set by the Israelis themselves, because these were precisely the crucial points in Tel Aviv’s requests. We probed some individuals who were well-informed, and we discovered that Ariel Sharon, who was then Prime Minister, had sent Ephraim Halevy to Cairo. We asked for confirmation, and got it: Halevy was in the Egyptian capital”.¹⁸⁰

Until a few months earlier, Halevy had been one of Sharon’s closest advisers, and had resigned in June after Dov Weisglass had taken on a more prominent role. The former chief of Mossad – an organization within he worked for twenty-eight years – Halevy had been the ‘prince’s’ during the Oslo years, and in the years of bitter disappointment which followed, as well as the man called upon to resolve problems in difficult moments. Such as the time he had been involved in the return of the two agents responsible for the failed poison attempt on Khaled Meshaal in Jordan in 1997. Does Halevy’s presence in Cairo therefore mean that the situation in December of 2003 is one of those very delicate ones? Osama Hamdan again recalls that “We had put forth a proposal: stopping all attacks against all civilians, Israelis and Palestinians”.¹⁸¹ The Egyptian response arrived after barely three days, and it was negative. The then second in command within Egyptian intelligence cites his boss’ position, one of the most powerful men in Egypt, saying “Omar Suleiman says it cannot work”.¹⁸² Hamdan continues: “We understood that Israel had rejected the offer. We later learned that Halevy had advised on accepting the offer, but that it was Sharon himself who rejected it”.¹⁸³ But it is also the disagreement between different actors on the Palestinian political scene which ensured the negotiations would fail – in particular Abu Ala’s attempt to obtain everything immediately. His request was not only that the parties should underwrite another *hudna*, but that he be given the authority by the factions to negotiate on their behalf with the Israelis. A ‘no’ is inevitable, and the agreement falls through.

¹⁸⁰ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Chapter 5: The March Watershed

Orphaned

November 2004 is slow, dreary, when suddenly Palestine is plunged into mourning. Far away from Ramallah, and after days of agony, Yasser Arafat dies in a military hospital on the outskirts of Paris. His funeral was held in Cairo, away from the *Haram al Sharif* in Jerusalem, the city in which he wanted to be buried. The very same day, his body is transported to the Muqata, in Ramallah, where Abu Ammar had spent the last two years of his life under Israeli siege, and laid to rest in a corner of the large courtyard. Three years later, his successor Mahmoud Abbas would dedicate a mausoleum to him. Arafat disappears, and Palestinian politics is abruptly faced with having to start a new chapter in its history, without its founding father, the man who was the symbol incarnate of the possibility of its independence and of its redemption, the man who on the streets of the West Bank and Gaza many still say had managed to put Palestine back on the map.

Abu Ammar's death changes everything for Fatah, for the Palestinian National Authority, but also for Hamas. Like Fatah, the Palestinian movement Islamist has been without its leader and its symbol for some months. It happened in spring, on March 22nd, 2004, when shaykh Ahmed Yassin is killed in a targeted assassination carried out at dawn by the Israeli air force, and ordered by the then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in person. Yassin was returning from the *Mujamma al-Islami* mosque, practically facing the house where he had lived most of his life: a modest house in the equally modest al-Sabra neighborhood of Gaza City. Low houses that look out onto a narrow streets, non-descript and unadorned: a few shops, a mosque, and lots of children during the daytime. As dawn was breaking, shaykh Ahmed Yassin was leaving the mosque, his paraplegic's wheelchair being pushed down the street after reciting the first prayer of the day. He was returning home when a missile launched from an Apache helicopter killed him at the age of sixty-six, along with seven other men, including three bodyguards and others among the faithful, while sixteen people – including two of his eleven children – were left injured.

The news spreads quickly across the Palestinian Territory and across the entire Arab world. That morning, in Jerusalem, everyone senses that something momentous has happened. It's not that the streets are very different, apart from the heightened state of alert which increases security measures such as soldiers and border patrols, especially in East Jerusalem. The difference is elsewhere, an intangible and anguished feeling carried on the air: from the early hours of the morning until nightfall, the loudspeakers of Jerusalem's mosques bear Qur'anic chants across the city, giving the day a unique feeling – a feeling which would be repeated only one other time, on November 11th of that same year, upon the death of Yasser Arafat in that hospital in Percy, on the outskirts of Paris. On that day, those same sacred chants are repeated, bringing people together across the Palestinian Territory, just as Palestinian politicians were brought together, overcoming

divisions between Palestinians and between Arabs, between the faithful and the lay, between governments allied with the West and those of the 'Axis of Evil', if only for a brief moment. For days, squares across the Arab world, the region's television networks, and the online fora increasingly popular with the young are replete with photographs of shaykh Yassin and particularly of that wheelchair to which he had been consigned for half a century. A wheelchair was brandished at his funeral and in the street protests that shook the entire region, as was its blackened skeleton, adopted in cartoons and caricatures as a kind of logo of resistance. Resistance against Israelis, against the United States who sided with the Israelis, and against Arab regimes who were accused of acquiescing.

All of a sudden, Hamas is orphaned not simply of the man who established the Islamic Resistance Movement at a meeting in his home, in December 1987, but of the figure portrayed in public as its spiritual guide. This loss was not unexpected, not least because shaykh Yassin had escaped a previous targeted assassination attempt carried out by the Israeli air force while he was in a meeting in September 2003. The former teacher, who had been a paraplegic since his teens, escaped with a wounded hand, but Tel Aviv's warning was clear: the list of Hamas' members who can be struck include the political leadership, its highest echelons. Such as the then third in command in Gaza, Ismail Abu Shanab. Or Mahmoud A-Zahhar.

Israel's strategy does not stop even after Yassin's death – a decision which surprises no one, least of all Palestinian Islamists themselves. His rapidly-chosen successor is the fifty-five year-old pediatrician Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, one of the *Nomenklatura* considered by the Israelis to be among the movement's most inflexible. This appointment indicates Hamas' choice to counterattack, explicitly avoiding any softening in its positions after such a severe blow as the assassination of the founder of the Islamist movement, who was widely thought to be Hamas' most representative public figure, at least in terms of his media profile. Rantisi, already considered by many a 'dead man walking', had already been targeted by Tsahal's air force in June of the previous year in an attack which left the fifty-five year-old pediatrician considered to be Yassin's heir apparent seriously wounded. Indeed, Yassin's successor would not last long: barely a month goes by, and on April 17th Rantisi dies in another targeted assassination. The most accredited interpretation of these events circulating amongst Hamas leaders at the time was that Ariel Sharon intended to put the leadership under as much pressure as possible. Sharon was believed to be concerned above all with the question of who would become Arafat's successor, and by targeting Yassin and Rantisi he was supposedly aiming to eliminate precisely those who were considered to be most charismatic by the Palestinian population: Abu Shanab in Gaza, Yassin, Rantisi himself, Ismail Haniyeh – who was wounded in 2003 – and Mahmoud A-Zahhar. Indeed, before that, a targeted assassination in Nablus in July of 2001 had killed two of Hamas' best-known leaders in the West Bank, Jamal Mansour and Jamal Salim. Whether the interpretation offered by Hamas' leaders is true or not, it is certain that ever since the Second Intifada Israel intensifies its use of extra-judicial killings, which reached a peak with Yassin, but did not stop there. After Rantisi's assassination, it is the turn of an attack carried out outside the Palestinian Occupied Territory, in Damascus, which plays host to Hamas' leadership-in-exile. Towards the end of September 2004, Izz al-Din al-Shaykh al-Khalili, who the Israelis considered to be a bridge between Hamas' military wings in the West Bank and in Gaza,

is killed when a bomb under his driver's seat is set off in the suburbs of the Syrian capital. Within the perverse logic of attack and counter-attack, in a spiral of revenge, the assassination of al-Shaykh al-Khalil provided the Israeli response to two simultaneous attacks carried out against two buses which had racked the commercial districts of the main southern Israeli city of Be'er Sheva towards the end of August. The Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades had claimed the attacks in a leaflet found in Hebron, the city from which the two suicide bombers came, who in turn themselves had intended to seek revenge for the death of Ahmed Yassin and of Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi.

Its founding leadership decimated over the previous few months, Hamas does not melt away like snow under the sun, and manages to organize and carry out a bloody attack such as the simultaneous bombings in Be'er Sheva, a city until then thought to be outside the reach of terrorist attacks. The attack itself is considered to be spectacular from the point of view of Hamas' military wing, but it also has obvious political implications, since it puts paid to the expectations of those who had ordered the decapitation of the Islamist movement with the publicly declared objective of eroding the consensus which favored the Islamist movement. Indeed, the four years following Yassin's assassination have gone in entirely the opposite direction: deprived of its best-known leaders in Gaza, Hamas goes beyond the consensus it had gathered through its activists and through its provision of social services, transforming that support into political allegiance and electoral success. In an *ex post* reading offered by some amongst the Islamist movement's leaders, the physical elimination of some of its leaders in the spring of 2004 – particularly Yassin and Rantisi – had no effect on the debate already ongoing within the organization concerning whether or not to participate in the PNA's institutions. Osama Hamdan points out that “the debate had already begun, even though it was only a theoretical question at the time. Half way through 2004, the Palestinian Authority had not yet decided whether it would hold a general election”.¹⁸⁴

Yet something does change within Palestinian politics. From a symbolic point of view, Yassin's death first and Arafat's barely a few months later bring to the surface a process which was already taking place amongst the cadres of all political groups, namely the emergence of individuals who had until that time been living in the charismatic leaders' shadows. Yassin and Arafat's traumatic departure from the Palestinian scene forces both nationalist and Islamist political elites to deal with the absence of the two leaders from their respective camps. There are no more symbols, no more father figures, no more fathers of a nation. There are no more totemic figures to work in the shadow of Palestine finds itself without well-established leaders, and ever since this point – since 2004 – leadership change takes on a convulsed rhythm, confused even, and increasingly violent as time goes by. At the root of all this there is the question of power-sharing, which Fatah has never experienced ever since the Palestinian National Authority transformed the leading party of the PLO into a party-state. For its part, after Abu Ammar's death, Hamas changed its strategy, moving from dealing with the PNA behind the scenes, to a more public relationship. This relationship, now out in the open, brings to the fore a debate which, although it dated all the way back to the height of the Second Intifada in 2002, had previously remained within the confines of the Islamist movement's leadership, namely over whether or not to participate in the PNA institutions. As Ghazi Hamad, one of Hamas' moderates, explains: “We started talking about political

¹⁸⁴ Author's interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

participation when the situation in Palestinian civil society during the Second Intifada had deteriorated to the point that the PNA had been considerably weakened”.¹⁸⁵ Hamad, who in fact had himself been arguing for the need for a political leadership detached from the resistance at least since the mid-Nineties, recalls that “the question was: how can we form a national leadership in order to shore up the PNA? We began discussions about this already in 2002, a debate which centered primarily around Gaza, and in which all leaders took part, from Ismail Abu Shanab to Mahmoud A-Zahhar, including Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi. The next step, however, happened because of Arafat’s death”.¹⁸⁶

Thus, Arafat’s death accelerated this debate. Hamas’ internal discussions concerning participation in the PNA are given a public face immediately after Abu Ammar’s funeral, in the form of the question of succession to Arafat and of presidential elections, which are hastily organized. The chosen date is January 9th, 2005, barely two months after the death of the PNA’s first president. The strong candidate to become his successor is chosen with equal speed in order to avoid leaving the Palestinian Authority in the midst of a leadership vacuum which would have been very delicate to manage. The name which emerges is Mahmoud Abbas, the old Abu Mazen, the man who had shared Arafat’s decisions over Oslo only to later come close to a head-on clash with him when, after having been appointed Prime Minister in the spring of 2003, he was denied by the President the powers required to reform the Palestinian Authority, and particularly to simplify the plethora of security organizations within the PNA. In the January 2005 Presidential elections, Abbas is to all intents and purposes unopposed. Only Mustapha Barghouthi – the most notable exponent of Palestinian civil society, and the best-known abroad – decides to present his candidacy. Barghouthi obtains an unexpected and very respectable share, nearing 20 percent. This result in itself testifies to the political maturity reached by the Palestinian electorate, despite the few opportunities it has had to exercise its right and duty to vote.

Hamas decides not field candidates for the Presidential elections, but also decides not to adopt a confrontational stance with respect to the elections themselves. Rather, the Islamist movement does not expose itself much, leaving its adherents free to vote as they chose. Indeed, something profound has already happened within the wider Palestinian electorate, signaled on Christmas Eve 2004, on December 23rd, when the first local elections since 1976 are held in the West Bank, since the Israeli occupying forces decided to renew local administrations. It was Yasser Arafat himself who had buckled under pressure from advisers and politicians and allowed ballot boxes to make the decision on renewing those local authorities which Abu Ammar had himself selected in 1994, mostly from within Fatah, at the birth of the Palestinian Authority. Ten years on, municipal councils were in trouble: if during the first phase of the Oslo plans, they had been through a transition away from Israeli military occupation towards local autonomy for some towns, then they had experience the blood and the ruins of the Second Intifada, and finally they witnessed the *de facto* cantonization of the West Bank, with the return of Tsahal – Tel Aviv’s army – to the Palestinian Territory, and the proliferation of hundreds of checkpoints which fragmented the West Bank.

The elections held on December 23rd, 2004, are limited, just a first taste of the consultation which would take place in four separate stages throughout 2005. Barely one

¹⁸⁵ Author’s interview with Ghazi Hamad, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

hundred and forty thousand voters are called to renew twenty-six town councils which have been carefully chosen amongst those where Hamas is weakest. Among these, there is only one city of any size: Jericho, one of Fatah's fortresses. But the result is explosive: at 84 percent, voter participation is massive, and Abu Mazen's party wins a majority in seventeen councils, but Hamas controls nine, with a total of seventy-five seats to Fatah's one hundred and thirty-five. In Jericho victory goes to a mixed list, with Fatah unable to win a single seat. The conclusion is not just that Hamas is on the rise, but that it is a key player in the post-Arafat transition process. Forecasts predicting Fatah as a clear winner clash with reality on the ground. Even in so partial a test as the Christmas municipal elections, these suggest that Hamas is strong not just in Gaza, but that it has built and consolidated its consensus even in a context such as the West Bank, which was traditionally linked to Fatah, and in the most recent years divided in urban islets surrounded by the Israeli army.

The result of local elections, so clearly favorable to Hamas, was also a message to Abu Mazen, de facto the only possible candidate in presidential elections since Marwan Barghouti, Fatah secretary general for the West Bank, is in an Israeli jail serving five life sentences. Fatah's unexpected electoral weakness confirms that the real game would begin after the Presidential elections planned for January 9th, when a different range of seats and constituencies – representation in the Palestinian Assembly – would be up for grabs. Only then would the real balance of power in the post-Arafat transition phase become clear. The pressure Hamas exerts on the January 9th consultations, however, goes beyond the matter of the electoral outcome. The Islamist movement had in practice complicated the electoral process as a result of the intensification of its battle with the Israelis in Gaza, and with the launching of mortar shells and rockets against settlers and soldiers in the weeks during the run-up to the elections. The clash is not simply military, it is also political. Israel, particularly on its political right, with the Likud party split in half, is debating the question of the pull-out from Gaza: a withdrawal which the Israeli parliament is discussing – ironically – just a few days before Ariel Sharon's enemy, Yasser Arafat, would die. The then leader of the Tel Aviv government had put forward the idea of withdrawing soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip in a February 2004 interview with the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*. To push this proposal through, Sharon was facing the deepest split ever seen in 'his' center-right party, Likud, at just the same time as the post-Arafat transition was being prepared. The idea of an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, however, had not influenced the behavior of Palestinian armed groups which – on the contrary – had continued to affect internal Palestinian politics in their own way both before and, as would become clear by mid January, after the elections. It is at this point that the suicide attack at the Karni crossing which joins Gaza to Israel freezes the tentative preliminary talks between Sharon's advisers and Abu Mazen's. The attack, which would result in six Israeli civilian dead as well as the three suicide bombers, is claimed by the Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, the group close to Fatah, by Hamas' own military wing, and by the Popular Resistance Committees. The armed strategy continues to parallel the political.

Tension remains high within the Palestinian Territory. Notwithstanding the continuous clashes between the Israelis and all the armed factions in Gaza, however, the Palestinian electoral machine does not stop, and the presidential vote takes place with a high turnout. The elections themselves, carried out under the supervision of about eight

hundred international observers who arrive in the Occupied Territory from all over the world, are democratic. Mahmoud Abbas not only wins the election against his only real opponent, Mustapha Barghouthi, he achieves an overall majority of preferences expressed. Over 70 percent of those eligible to vote takes part, and of these 62 percent choose Abbas, who – despite not exactly running away with victory – can therefore be said to have achieved consensus beyond party lines. It is of course true that Hamas did not express a preference in the electoral competition, and that it did not put forward its own candidate. But it is also the case that Hamas' abstention was 'soft': it was a way of signaling that with the beginning of a new chapter in the Palestinian Authority's history, the Islamist movement had crossed a Rubicon in deciding to participate in Palestinian institutional life.

Abu Mazen could attract Hamas' consensus directly. Abu Mazen's history as protagonist of the Oslo process, and the history of the Islamist movement's leaders who had opposed such a peace ever since the days of their participation in the First Intifada were too different for that. Things could have been different had other candidates for the Presidency been nominated. Marwan Barghouthi, for example, had refused to be listed, even as a purely symbolic presence, as some had suggested during November 2004. Had Barghouthi been the presidential candidate, Hamas might well have considered voting for the leader of the *tanzim*, who after all was the leader of the Second Intifada lionized by the media and with whom Hamas agreed on the strategy to adopt during the Al-Aqsa Revolt. This much was hinted at by Muhammad Jamal al-Natsche, one of the best-known leaders of Hamas in the Hebron area, interviewed in a Be'er Sheva prison just days after Abu Mazen's election to the PNA Presidency.¹⁸⁷ Putting forth Marwan Barghouthi as a candidate would have brought together the so-called 'street', the battleground of the Second Intifada, with 'the cell' within which about eight thousand Palestinians – including those who took part in the Al-Aqsa uprising – were detained. That said, Abu Mazen was far from unpopular with Hamas, who, on the contrary, saw him as necessary precisely in order for the Islamist movement to enter into the PNA structures and thus to sharing power. On the other hand a 'Hamas President' would never have been able to meet either the Israelis or those states which are crucial to the solution of the Middle Eastern question. In this sense, it would be better to have as head of state a well-accepted and esteemed figure such as Abu Mazen, who would be in a position to meet Ariel Sharon and who would be welcomed in Europe and in the United States as a representative of Palestinian moderates.

Mahmoud Abbas becomes PNA President in the context of a political landscape which was very different to the one which preceded it: Yasser Arafat, the founding father, was no longer there, and Abu Mazen had a very different personality, a different character from a predecessor famed for his histrionics, for his extroverted nature and for his passion. In some ways – certainly in terms of his public image – Abbas is Arafat's exact opposite. He also represents a different way of conducting internal politics, as well as a different assessment of international patrons and of adversaries. Abu Mazen had also been the main Fatah leader to favor the co-option of Hamas into the PNA ever since 2003, hoping this would provide a way of reigning in its military power and of

¹⁸⁷ Author's interview with Muhammad Jamal al-Natsche, Be'er Sheva, Eischel detention center, January 12th, 2005. Muhammad Jamal an-Natsche would later be elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council at the January 25th, 2006 general elections in the Change and Reform list.

controlling its political influence. However, in the aftermath of Arafat's death, Abu Mazen quickly realizes that controlling Hamas as a political force had become a difficult task indeed. The Islamist movement showed every intention of not remaining in the shadows but of fully entering the Palestinian political arena with a specific agenda. This agenda was not limited to participation in PNA institutions, but aimed more broadly to reform the organization which had traditionally been given the mandate to represent the will of the Palestinian people: the PLO. This quickly becomes clear after Abu Mazen's inauguration as President, when, on January 23rd, Hamas and Islamic Jihad declare a unilateral suspension of attacks on Israel in order to allow President Abbas to negotiate a ceasefire with Israel. This is also a starting point for negotiations between Palestinian factions, once again with Egypt's mediation, in order to reach a *de facto* unilateral ceasefire with Israel. The Cairo Declaration of March 17th, which agrees to continue for the entirety of 2005 the 'atmosphere of calm' with respect to Israel explicitly states that the factions had collectively "agreed to develop the Palestine Liberation Organization on bases that will be settled upon in order to include all the Palestinian powers and factions", and to "form a committee to define [the] bases" on which to do so.¹⁸⁸

It is not the first time that Hamas calls for the reform of the PLO. It had previously asked Yasser Arafat between 1992 and 1993, when it had suggested an agreement whereby the Islamist group would have held 40 percent of the representatives within the Palestine National Council (PNC), alongside the entry of Hamas into a profoundly reformed PLO. Hamas leaders had traveled to Arafat's Tunis exile to discuss a possible thawing of relations, and they later participated in a meeting held in Khartoum mediated by the Sudanese Islamist leader Hassan al-Tourabi.¹⁸⁹ Abu Ammar, however, had rejected these overtures, because he wanted to avoid placing Fatah and Hamas on the same footing within Palestinian representative institutions. By this stage, however, times had clearly changed, not just because Arafat is no longer there, but because Fatah is weak from the point of view of its base support, and because Hamas was demonstrating with each passing day its intention to take full part in the representative institutions available to Palestinians. Within the Islamist leadership in the West Bank, in Gaza and abroad, the winning strategy between 2004 and 2007 is participation. Hamas decided to stop its boycott of the PNA, and indeed that it too should enter the halls of power in the National Authority. It chose to do so first and foremost through the instrument of electoral consensus, thereby remaining strictly within the representative branch of government.

The first step was participation in local elections. In truth, for Hamas entering the public sphere at a local level never posed an ideological problem, nor did it pose a problem in terms of political practice, because this was a primarily administrative form of participation and therefore perfectly coherent with its focus on the provision of welfare, of services which were in the interest of the community, and which the Islamist movement had already been pursuing for years, continuing in the tradition established by the Muslim Brotherhood. Running local administrations was never considered incompatible with a political stance opposed to the PNA. The 2004-2005 elections, however, take on a very different meaning: they represent a 'soft' entry into the

¹⁸⁸ The full text of the Cairo Declaration is accessible in the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine, at <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/69B9D56DF48732C48525708A0053358B>.

¹⁸⁹ Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, op. cit. pp. 98-99.

institutions of the National Authority, as well as providing a necessary test of the real consensus they met with at the grassroots level. The Christmas elections in the West Bank produce a result which was unexpected even to the Hamas leadership itself. The subsequent test, the elections held in Gaza on January 25th, 2005, just a few days after the election of the new President, Mahmoud Abbas, confirms that the Strip is (nearly) under the control of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*. For the newly sworn in Abu Mazen, the message from Hamas is clear: the Islamist movement's goal is sharing power, a contingency for which – as would become clear in the following two years – Fatah was not prepared.

The March Watershed

Gaza is practically a full house for Hamas: seven municipal councils out of ten, seventy five councilors out of one hundred and eighteen, and a widespread consensus in that first round of local elections, with over eighty percent of registered electors turning out to vote. As was the case for the West Bank, the elections are no more than a test, since barely ninety thousand Palestinians are called upon to designate administrators for the small municipal councils scattered across the Strip. There are two exceptions to this: Dayr al-Balah and Beit Hanoun, towns which also have large refugee camps, and sites marked by daily confrontations with the Israelis. The completeness of Hamas' success is one of the factors which most drives it towards taking part in the general elections. As Ghazi Hamad recalls: "The people were voting for us, and this was a sign that the Palestinians wanted a change of leadership, as demonstrated also by the fact that we had just won in areas where we had not been strong until that point".¹⁹⁰ The victory in local elections was useful to Hamas, which decides to cash in on the political credit it earned in the following days, when the question of dialogue between the various Palestinian factions returns to the fore.

At the heart of yet another meeting between the various labels of Palestinian, again mediated by the Egyptian authorities, is still the question of the *hudna* with Israel, the truce that should silence the armed groups and which becomes again prominent after Mahmoud Abbas' election – Abbas who himself was one of the authors of the truce of June 2003. There is much more on the menu, however: Hamas' entry into the PNA structures which took place on March 17th, the date of a watershed for Hamas, the date of its formal decision to participate in the political process. This is the day of the Cairo Declaration, with which twelve Palestinian factions adhere to a year-long 'calm'. This is also the document that contains the crucial passage which indicates the watershed Hamas has just traversed. The document states that the factions "agreed on the necessity of completing total reform in all areas, of supporting the democratic process in its various aspects and of holding local and legislative elections at their determined time according to an election law to be agreed upon" which should be based "on an equal division (of seats) in a mixed system".¹⁹¹ The Islamist movement has therefore changed its strategy, it has chosen to take part in elections with a majority decision taken by its leadership. This shifts the movement's centre of gravity, giving greater power to the pragmatic wing

¹⁹⁰ Author's interview with Ghazi Hamad, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

¹⁹¹ Cairo Declaration, op. cit.

which in 1996 had been forced to buckle under the pressure of the majority, giving up the prospect of running in the first general elections for the Palestinian National Authority.

There are reasons for this change which are rooted in contemporary circumstances, confirming Hamas' pragmatism. Compared to 1996, the differences are several, and they are important. Azzam Tamimi's words succinctly sum up both the atmosphere in 2004 and what would later take place in 2005 with the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. These events were nothing short of a watershed in Palestinian politics: "Oslo was dead. Arafat and Yassin had gone. The Israelis were leaving Gaza".¹⁹² The debasement of the Oslo Process, eventually dealt a mortal blow by the Second Intifada¹⁹³, was therefore crucial for Hamas' own transition. So much so that it became one of the key features of the Cairo Accords of March 2005, accords which included the participation of groups like Hamas, despite the explicit prohibition on armed groups taking part in elections contained in the 1995 interim agreements between Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁹⁴ Thus, for Hamas it would have been easier to accept a formal entry into the PNA by way of a parliamentary presence, were some of the bonds of the Oslo Accords which had rendered the Authority dependent on Israel loosened.

In 1996, the push to take part in elections had been backed by very few individuals, amongst which Ismail Haniyeh. Ten years later, on the other hand, all the groups which make up the Hamas leadership give the involvement in PNA institutions the green light. The decision does not come without difficulty or without strenuous resistance from certain quarters: Hamas has long debated – and has long been divided – on this question, so that finding a majority to coalesce around the idea of taking part in a public arena so particular and so incomplete as the Palestinian National Authority was not an easy task. In the end, as has always been the case throughout Hamas' history, the Islamist movement accepted the will of the majority, according to a process very similar to that 'democratic centralism' which was the hallmark of mass structures such as those of Communist parties, ultimately defending the final decision and overcoming earlier splits. The communiqué with which Hamas announces its decision to take part in elections in itself provides an insight into Hamas' internal structure: the announcement was made – not coincidentally – in Nablus, where the opposition to the choice of participating had been strongest. The local leader is Muhammad Ghazal, and the date is March 12th, just days before the Cairo Declaration.¹⁹⁵

These kinds of processes are in any case never linear, particularly when the transition from armed resistance movement to political party does not take place during a period of peace and stability. Rather, Hamas' shift towards participation occurs in a context of mutual hostility as is the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians which has never once stopped over the course of six decades. In other words, the transformation Hamas underwent after 2004 does not follow the expectations of standard conflict

¹⁹² Author's interview with Azzam Tamimi, London, July 12th, 2008.

¹⁹³ In its conclusions, the manifesto of the Change and Reform List through which Hamas took part in the general elections of January 2006 states that the Al-Aqsa Intifada "created new facts on the ground that have rendered the Oslo program a thing of the past, and different parties, including the Zionist occupation, have already spoken of 'burying Oslo'." Text reprinted in Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, op. cit., pp. 274-294.

¹⁹⁴ Author's interview with Farhat As'ad, Ramallah, October 15th, 2008.

¹⁹⁵ International Crisis Group, "Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration", *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 49, 18 January 2006, p. 5.

resolution theories. As Alistair Crooke points out, “ Hamas and other Islamist groups continue to see themselves as resistance movements, but increasingly they see the prospect that their organizations may evolve into political currents that are focused on non-violent resistance”.¹⁹⁶ The problem is that Hamas’ ability to maintain the strength of an armed group is in itself part of the reason why the movement can maintain its legitimacy and the support among its base. These are not veterans of a conflict who must be helped to rejoin society in peacetime, nor is this a transition towards solely towards moderate Islamist positions: Hamas is still Hamas, even when it chooses to take part in the PNA’s representative institutions, even if it is obvious that between 2004 and 2007 the pragmatic wing of the so-called ‘doves’ manages to gain a majority consensus amongst activists.

At the same time, Hamas also senses weariness in the Palestinian populations after four years of Intifada, and decides to suspend suicide attacks against civilians inside Israel – a point on which the people’s passive consent is eroding. Bassam Na’im, one of the leaders in Hamas’ middle-age generation retrospectively analyses the choice of fully taking part in the political-representative sphere, explaining that “the occupation and the resistance are fragmenting Palestinian society. It is for this reason that we chose to try to take part in the institutions”.¹⁹⁷ The Hamas leadership understands that ordinary people are worn out, showing just how sensitive the Islamist leadership has been to the mood of Palestinian public opinion from its inception to the more recent stages of its history. What people think in the villages, in the refugee camps, and in the large urban centers in the West Bank and in Gaza weighs on the decisions of the Islamist movement. Vice versa, the capillary reach of Hamas’ social and political programs in the Occupied Territory provides the Islamist movement with an accurate map of the current political situation. What Ghazi Hamad writes barely three weeks before the elections, when the possibility of delaying the general election was still on the cards, is telling in this respect: “ Hamas, however, is unlikely to resort to violence. The lack of law and order, which in the public mind is blamed on the PA and the absence of the security forces, is a major reason for the growing popularity of the movement. Hamas would not want to come to be seen as a contributing factor”.¹⁹⁸ Hamas is therefore clearly very sensitive to consensus, just like other organizations based on mass mobilization.

Just as at other points in the movement’s over two decades, Hamas decided to take part in general elections only after having consulted all four of the groups which make up the organization: in Gaza, in the West Bank, in prisons, and abroad. In each of these *constituencies*, the Islamist movement’s militants voted, expressing their opinion on the question of participation in elections and thus on the question of whether or not to enter the PNA. Witnesses testify that it was a long process, due to the difficulties to carry

¹⁹⁶ Alastair Crooke, “From Rebel Movement to Political Party: the Case of the Islamic Resistance Movement”, op. cit., p. 1

¹⁹⁷ Author’s interview with Bassam Na’im, Gaza City, November 6th, 2007.

¹⁹⁸ Ghazi Hamad, “Palestinian Elections are Vital” in bitterlemons.org, 2 January 2006. “Elections might serve to create a common strategy for how to confront Israel. Hamas believes there must be a mix between armed resistance and political negotiations. It is a belief rooted in the fact that after ten years of PA negotiations with Israel, little or nothing has been achieved. It is around such a strategy that Hamas is hoping to find national consensus. Such national consensus is important not only for internal strength but for external credibility. If Palestinians speak with one voice, the message is more likely to be heard and respected by Israel.”

out the internal consultations. There are obviously no hard data concerning the results in each of the four constituencies. Azzam Tamimi, one of the most prominent experts on the Hamas leadership outside the Occupied Palestinian Territory, argues that two thirds of the leadership abroad declared its support for participation, overturning the position reached in the debate over the 1996 elections. In the West Bank and in Gaza too, the majority had come out in favor of participation. Indeed, Ahmed Youssef, who was Haniyeh's closest aide during the first Hamas-only government, contradicted Tamimi in arguing that it was precisely the leadership inside the Territory which won over the resistance of the leadership abroad.¹⁹⁹ The most important factor, however, appears to be the prisons. More interesting not only because of the result, but because of the way in which the consultation took place.

For Palestinians, being arrested, ending up in an Israeli prison, being released and then ending up back in again is not considered a mark of shame. It is estimated that from 1967 onwards at least seven hundred thousand Palestinians have passed through Israeli jails: in every family, in other words, there is or was someone who is defined simply as a *prisoner*, whatever the reason for their arrest. It could be black market labor, or political militancy, or membership of an armed group, but in all cases one is and remains a *prisoner*. The experience of jail, therefore, is so widespread, so common, and so constant in the history of Palestinian society that particularly as far as political party militants are concerned it is never considered a hiatus from active political life. One is a militant outside, and one continues to be a militant behind bars also. This is why Hamas considers its prisoners in jail as a fully-fledged constituency, on a par with geographically-defined groupings. Detainees have the same right to take part in the decision-making process, they have a full voice in discussions. Indeed, at times, they paradoxically have greater freedom to work on the movement's strategy, and on dialogue with other factions.

Between 2004 and 2005, Hamas in prison, therefore, approved participation in general elections. It did so notwithstanding the myriad obvious difficulties of communicating between prisons, not least by taking advantage of the Israeli practice of frequently subjecting inmates to transfers from one prison to another. At any rate, a quarter of Palestinian prisoners is concentrated within Ketziot, a prison which journalists and international observers manage to gain access to only with great difficulty. The stories of those who have been there describe Ketziot as a camp within which detainees live in large tents, a prison which is completely different from the model detention centers in Be'er Sheva in the south, or Hadarim in the North. Ketziot can hold up to two thousand four hundred detainees, a quarter of the Palestinians incarcerated by Israel, Hamas militants included. The Hamas council in prisons consisted in twenty-three members: a wide majority, between sixteen and seventeen, spoke out in favor of participating in elections. Those who opposed participation were not opposed to taking part in the PNA institutions *per se*, they feared what in actual fact later occurred, namely that the international community would not have accepted the Islamist presence within the Palestinian Legislative Council. Least of all would they accept its presence in government. Those who supported participation, on the other hand, believed that being able to influence PNA decisions was in itself worthwhile. One of those who took part in the discussion recalls that weighing heavily on the final decision was a document written by shaykh Hassan Youssef – one of the most respected Islamist religious and political

¹⁹⁹ Author's interview with Ahmed Youssef, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

authorities in the West Bank, and an imam at the central market mosque in Ramallah – in which he declared he did not expect Hamas to obtain a majority of seats. Thus, the question of actually winning the elections – a victory which would have been very arduous to manage – was not even on the radar screen.

In any case, accepting to take part in elections was no simple matter for Hamas activists, it was a decision which had to be analyzed in all its possible aspects. The debate over participation in the 2006 elections goes to show just how independent Hamas' decision-making was from patron-client relations of power, and how they were instead a response to specific political problems. In prison, as in the other *constituencies*, Hamas militants imagine the possible scenarios of an electoral participation. One possibility was that the movement should run with low-ranking members of the organization, without its most high-profile personalities. A second possibility was to taking part but with only a limited number of candidates, mirroring a decision taken by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 2005 general elections. The third possibility considered was entering into an electoral coalition. The first scenario is quickly discarded, because the absence of recognizable names would diminish the possibility of a strong showing, and would have left the movement open to criticisms of being weak and of not representing a significant part of the population. It is precisely the fear of showing weakness through an unsatisfactory result which also undermines the third option, the coalition. The *a posteriori* example suggested by an Islamist leader from the West Bank was the following: Mustapha Barghouthi had obtained an excellent result in the presidential elections of 2005, but his support dropped considerably a year later during political and legislative elections. In this leader's own words "had we, for example, decided to enter into a coalition with him, and had we then obtained the result which the ballot box later delivered, the interpretation would have been different from the reality: it would have been said that it was Barghouthi and his National Initiative that had received the people's support".²⁰⁰

The second scenario, the one based on a strategy similar to that adopted by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during elections for the renewal of the People's Assembly, Egypt's lower house, is the most intensely debated. Egypt was going through a lively phase at the time: the opposition to President Mubarak had raised its head, and the reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood had established contacts with its secular counterparts. The Ikhwan's traditional caution, however, had lead the largest Islamist movement in the Arab world to not press ahead but rather to avoid challenging Mubarak and scaring off the international community. The Ikhwan, which as a political organization is illegal, had by-passed the prohibition on participating in the elections by running as 'independents', but it feared that its participation might be read as a presage of a possible electoral victory and a sudden change of regime in Cairo. In order to avoid such fears, the Ikhwan decided to field a number of candidates equaling less than a third of seats in the Assembly. Even had they all been elected, in other words, Egypt's political balance would not be upset. The Egyptian Brotherhood, in other words, was not aiming to obtain a majority in Parliament, merely to consolidate its options in the legislative branch of the political system, hoping for a *de facto* legitimization of its presence. Hamas, on the other hand, had not adopted the Egyptian Brotherhood's cautious strategy,

²⁰⁰ Author's interview with Islamist militant who wanted to remain anonymous, West Bank, October 2008.

even though among the Gaza leadership some – like Sayyed Abu Musameh – had unsuccessfully attempted to push for a strategy similar to the Ikhwan’s in Cairo.²⁰¹

Contributing to tip the balance towards a ‘no’ to limited participation was also the decision taken by Mahmoud Abbas to push the elections back from July 2005 to January 2006. The fear that delays would increase the possibility of fraud had become increasingly pressing, and Hamas’ leadership decided that it would be better to field as many and as good a caliber of candidates as possible in order to compensate for the fraud which they believed was not simply a possibility, but a certainty. The movement had commissioned independent polls – although sources do not indicate which groups carried them out – in order to find out how many preferences Hamas would obtain were it to decide to take part in the elections scheduled for the summer of 2005. The results spoke of a share of preferences around 30 percent. When the date was moved to the following January, polls were repeated, but the results never went above 40 percent. According to well-informed sources, which asked to be kept anonymous, it was precisely the decision by Mahmoud Abbas to postpone the elections that shifted the mood of the electorate: “Paradoxically, what earned us more votes was the postponement to January. It was the people first and foremost who feared fraud and wished to punish Fatah as the leading faction in the Palestinian National Authority”.

For Hamas, the point was not even the specific electoral system under which to hold the elections. The important thing was deciding whether to enter the competition or whether to repeat the choice made in 1996. Having crossed the Rubicon of participation, other considerations were seen as merely secondary. Thus, in the Cairo Accords of 2005, in which Hamas signs up to participation in general elections, the Islamist movement concentrates on a single point, namely that candidates would not be asked to make any commitments in relation to the Oslo Accords. The agreement itself, at any rate, lay outside of the scope outlined by the peace process established by the agreement between Arafat and Rabin, because Israel had no say either in the electoral law or in the organization of the elections themselves. Hamas, not least because it considered itself sufficiently strong in terms of its popular consensus regardless of the precise architecture of the consultation, therefore decides to largely ignore the technicalities of the electoral law, leaving other factions the freedom to choose them. Indeed, it is Egypt that presses for a mixed system, and an agreement between Mahmoud Abbas and the Popular Front in that direction is ultimately found.²⁰² Hamas would not oppose ‘pink quotas’ either: established especially for this second election to the Palestinian legislature, all told, they would surprisingly actually make a crucial contribution to the Islamist movement’s victory.

A Silent Presence

The Cairo Declaration of March 17th, 2005 with which the Palestinian factions approved a year-long *hudna* is Abu Mazen’s calling card during the opening stages of his Presidency. It is with this immediate and striking success that Abbas presents his credentials to the international community as the right man for negotiations, perhaps even

²⁰¹ Author’s interview with Ghazi Hamad, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

²⁰² Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

able to bring back on track a *road map for peace* which had been derailed before it had even started. Even Israel should be content with such an important result as a unilateral truce declared by all Palestinian armed factions, providing Israel's cities – which were at the time still under the threat of suicide bombings, with a breath of fresh air. For Ariel Sharon, however, the agreement reached in Cairo also means that Hamas is back in the game, thereby also indirectly declaring the failure of the strategy of targeted assassinations against the Islamist movement's leadership, which had been initiated by the old General Arik himself. Killing Shehadeh, Abu Shanab, Yassin, Rantisi and the dozens of other more or less prominent Islamist leaders was not enough to break the consensus which the heirs to the Muslim Brotherhood's 'operational branch' received. On the contrary, popular support was consolidating and transforming the movement into an electoral force to be reckoned with. Moreover, Hamas is drawn into the political limelight precisely at the moment Sharon is finalizing the most important decision of the last few years of his political life: the withdrawal from Gaza.

Ariel Sharon's new unilateralist strategy has an explosive impact on the Palestinian political transition. Already in February 2004, thanks also to a level of consensus which Israeli Prime Ministers had not received for years both domestically and on the international community, the former general proposed Israel's 'disengagement' from Gaza, and quickly brings it to fruition precisely in 2005. *De facto*, withdrawing from Gaza meant dismantling that complex machinery of occupation which had controlled the Strip ever since 1967, despite the installment of the Palestinian National Authority in Gaza City itself in 1994. The Israeli settlements, which had appeared in strategically important locations to split the Strip into three sections, had allowed the government in Tel Aviv to justify its military presence in order to defend the inhabitants of the settlements. But government support for the colonial enterprise in Gaza had not paid off the way it had in the West Bank. In Gaza, the settlements' population had never reached significant numbers, barely a few thousand people, around which a costly and security machinery had been erected including military outposts, soldiers and no-man's-lands. Little enclaves, pleasant compounds with villas, flowerbeds and swimming pools surrounded by a Palestinian population in Gaza which was growing exponentially, up to the one and a half million estimated in 2008, confined to refugee camps and overcrowded cities.

Over thirty years after the construction of the first Israeli settlement in Gaza, the settlers movement's greatest supporter, Ariel Sharon, decided that the price for Tel Aviv was too high both in financial terms and in moral and political ones. Gaza cannot be controlled short of a systematic occupation the price of which would be too high not least in terms of human lives amongst the military: better to abandon it and manage the problem of the Strip from the outside by means of a *cordon sanitaire* around its borders. Five years after the withdrawal from South Lebanon ordered by Ehud Barak, Sharon chooses for Hamas in Gaza a strategy analogous to the one adopted against the Hizbullah in the southern areas of the Cedar State: an attempt to control from a distance in order not to get bogged down in an increasingly hostile territory, not least because this territory is increasingly dominated by Hamas. Despite strong opposition, particularly by the settlers' lobby, Sharon manages to convince Israelis that the withdrawal is necessary, and even manages to gain the support of the international community, first and foremost by George

W. Bush's US administration, which views the Gaza withdrawal as the breaking of an impasse in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which had been lasting for far too long.

Neither Israeli public opinion nor the international community understand that Sharon's unilateralism would bring with it the bitter fruit of a crisis in Palestinian politics which was becoming increasingly difficult to control with the tools that had been used up until that point. Indeed, the Israeli withdrawal from the Strip has the effect of increasing the consensus Hamas receives. Hamas never gave up the possibility of armed resistance against Israel, and the withdrawal of Tsahal soldiers is viewed by everyone as the victory of a strategy adopted by the Islamist movement which had never given up ground, as on the contrary Fatah had repeatedly been seen to do. Among Palestinians many say that resistance pays off, while Fatah's and the PNA leadership's acquiescence towards Israel have only brought losses for the Palestinians: the Israelis never stopped building settlements in the West Bank, and the separation wall is proceeding in all speed, swallowing up vast tracts of land.

The withdrawal from Gaza is over by early August of 2005 without encountering too many problems aside from the resistance of a few thousand die-hard settlers who did not want to leave the Strip. Neither the PNA nor Hamas place obstacles on the path of the Israeli withdrawal. The Islamist movement, however, immediately cashes in on its winnings, describing the withdrawal as the result of the success of the strategy Hamas had always adhered to: armed confrontation against occupying forces, and no caving in on the peace process. Resistance, the Islamist movement says, brings true results on the ground, and the withdrawal is the clear demonstration of this fact: Israel has abandoned Gaza just as it abandoned Southern Lebanon. Hamas is like Hizbullah. Hamas is celebrating a victory at precisely the time it is preparing to meet the voters. Israel immediately understands that the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza runs the risk of its most explosive effects being felt through the ballot box, and Sharon attempts in all sorts of ways to prevent Hamas from taking part in those elections. Indeed, bowing to pressure from abroad, particularly from Egypt, Abbas had already delayed to open the ballot boxes to voters by six months from July 2005 – the eve of Israel's withdrawal – to January 2006.

Israel's pressure would last until the day before the elections themselves, echoing the same doubts expressed by Mahmoud Abbas' own entourage, and particularly by former Interior Minister and an ambitious leader himself, Muhammad Dahlan. On the latter, the media has run wild over recent years. On the one hand, he had been described as a Fatah leader accused of corruption and of running various monopolies in Gaza – crucial ones, such as cement and fuel. On the other hand, he was portrayed as a figure well-received by the US, by the UK, and by Tel Aviv. Indeed, according to the Israeli press itself, the Israeli government had even hoped that Dahlan might control Gaza after Sharon's withdrawal in August 2005. As Dahlan himself revealed to David Rose, the investigative journalist who published US plans to prompt a Palestinian civil war just after Hamas victory in those elections: "Everyone was against the elections" – everyone, that is, "except Bush", who "needed an election" in the Middle East. No one within the Administration would ever have expected Hamas' victory.²⁰³ Recalling the post-electoral

²⁰³ David Rose, *The Gaza Bombshell*, op. cit.

atmosphere, a Department of Defence official told Rose “Everyone blamed everyone else [...]. We sat there in the Pentagon and said, ‘Who the fuck recommended this?’”²⁰⁴

Meanwhile, a few months earlier in Gaza, in September 2005, the military wing was celebrating the withdrawal as its own victory. The Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades distribute fliers with the typical iconography of the resistance – the pictures of its seven commanders – while Muhammad al-Deif, its leader, even gives a rare television interview, coming out of hiding in order to break his silence.²⁰⁵ Israel realizes, after its withdrawal, that its pullout was stage managed by Hamas as a fully-fledged political victory, and that the *cordon sanitaire* set up around Gaza has not resolved Israel’s security problems, first and foremost for those towns in the Negev which were being targeted by several home-made rockets. The rockets were fired from the Strip, particularly after September 23rd, when in an apparent accident during the celebrations for the withdrawal being held in the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza, the camp is devastated by the explosion of some of the rockets. The Sharon government’s response to this doubly negative result is once again entirely and solely military.

After the withdrawal, Israel carried out an offensive which included a massive if limited intervention in Gaza using artillery and the air force, as well as a campaign of arrests which struck not Hamas’ military wing, but its political wing in the West Bank – the one which had most pushed for the Islamist movement to participate in the general elections. About two hundred and fifty Hamas supporters are arrested in September 2005, mostly activists, candidates in the forthcoming elections, professionals, municipal councilors throughout the West Bank from Bethlehem to Hebron, from Nablus to the heart of Ramallah. All those arrested are supporters of Palestinian Islamist movements: not just members of Hamas, but also of Islamic Jihad. This wave of arrests was part of a wider operation known by the code name ‘First Rain’, which began after the clutch of Qassam rockets which Hamas launched on Sderot and on the Negev. ‘First Rain’ had concentrated on Gaza, but had at the same time widened into the West Bank. The tactic adopted appeared to focus on arresting many among the cadres of Islamist organizations, particularly targeting certain leaders considered to be crucial both to Hamas’ political strategy and to the popularization of its ideas amongst the more disadvantaged sections of the population. Two names exemplify this pattern: Hassan Youssef and shaykh Ahmed Haj Ali. Freed barely a few months earlier, after his latest sentence served in an Israeli jail, Hassan Youssef was considered one of the Hamas leaders best-disposed towards its transformation towards a political structure. Like Muhammad Ghazal, Hamas’ leader in Nablus. Ghazal was the very same leader who, in an historic press conference, stated “The Charter is not the Qur’an”, implying that the infamous reference to a call for the destruction of Israel could indeed be taken out of the Charter. And finally shaykh Ahmed Haj Ali, a figure already very popular in Nablus, who had himself spoken in favor of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders.²⁰⁶

The delay in the general elections, initially scheduled for July 2005, to January 2006; the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza; Tsahal’s iron fist in the West Bank; these are all events

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ International Crisis Group, “Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration”, *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 49, January 18th, p. 7.

²⁰⁶ Graham Usher “Hard Rain”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, n. 763, 6-12 October 2005.

which do not help Fatah. Abu Mazen's party did not come out strengthened from these events, despite the fact that in subsequent rounds of elections in spring 2005, municipal councils were carefully chosen in order to exclude Islamist strongholds, because Fatah does not tackle the central issue, namely the question of the representativeness of its cadres in relation to its support base. This would have been possible only through the famously Sixth Congress of the Palestinian nationalist movement, often announced since 1989 but never held until it finally took place in Bethlehem in August 2009. On the contrary, Fatah betrays the depth of the split running through it when before the general elections it fields two separate lists. In competition with each other, these two lists reflect the fracture between the 'young Turks' and the old militants who had experienced the Tunisian exile. It is Marwan Barghouti, from the Israeli prison cell he is held in, who in the end mediates between the two and manages to recompose the fracture between his own followers who had gathered under the banner of *Al-Mustaqbal* – The Future – and the old guard *Nomenklatura*. Qaddura Fares, one of the best-known leaders of the intermediate generation, who had the ear of Fatah's base and a long history of imprisonment in Israeli jails would later call this "the biggest mistake of my life".²⁰⁷

Hamas, for its part, uses the delay in order to better prepare its electoral machinery, oiling the cogs of the new instrument it had taken up, and preparing what would have become its political manifesto: the electoral program of the Change and Reform list, the banner under which the Islamist movement would run. The preamble, the eighteen points, and the brief conclusions of this program would reveal an important change. With the decision to take part in elections, Hamas had chosen to restrict its geographical ambitions, and to become in a sense even more and exclusively Palestinian than it already was, investing this aspect with an even greater political significance towards the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and towards Israel.²⁰⁸ The manifesto, however, remains Hamas' most important public document, certainly since the 1988 Charter. This much the Islamist movement's leaders readily admit, as do those who specifically made their participation in what would become the first Hamas government explicitly on that manifesto. Nasser al-Din al-Sha'er, for example, was an independent, and one of the best-known intellectuals in Nablus, appointed to the post of Executive Deputy Prime Minister to Ismail Haniyeh. He considers this document the one "from which Hamas' political transformation begins".²⁰⁹ The manifesto is light years away from the foundational *Mithaq*, written at the outset of the movement's life, the one written to mobilize the masses of the Intifada and motivate new activists. The electoral manifesto is its every fiber a manifesto for government, detailed, in-depth, and not at all vague in defining social, educational, health and youth policies. It is specific in calling for *shari'a* to be the "principal source" – and one should note well that it does not speak of *shari'a* being the "absolute" source – of legislation in Palestine, just as it is specific in stating that "Islam and its cultural results constitute our framework of reference and our way of life in all its political, economic, social and legal aspects".²¹⁰ The military front – armed

²⁰⁷ Author's interview with Qaddura Fares, Ramallah, February 27th, 2008.

²⁰⁸ Chrystie Flournoy Swiney, *Ideological and Behavioural Metamorphoses: A New Charter for Hamas*, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford 2007, p. 33. Accessible at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~metheses/FlournoyThesis.pdf>.

²⁰⁹ Author's interview with Nasser al Din al Sha'er, Nablus, November 2nd, 2008.

²¹⁰ The full text of the manifesto is reprinted in Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, op. cit., pp. 274-294.

confrontation with Israel – remains in the background, as a simple reference to the need that the ‘resistance’ has not be abandoned. For the remainder of the text, the question of armed resistance is given no space at all, in a document which is therefore exclusively civilian, delegating ‘resistance’ to the military wing, and to armed factions in general.

By the same token, however, the manifesto of the Change and Reform list includes a range of terms from a political dictionary light years away from the one used in 1988, a semantic arsenal very close in fact to the one which is a hallmark of Western-style democracies. For example, the list attempts to “build an advanced Palestinian civil society that is based on political pluralism and the alternation of power”, it calls for a separation of powers in the Western European mold between judiciary, executive and representative powers. Most importantly, in the section entitled “Public Liberties and Citizens’ Rights”, the manifesto talks of citizens “equal before the law”, and of “citizens equal in rights and duties”, for whom “security and protection for his or her life and properties” must be provided. Towards the general public, therefore, a policy of “equal opportunities” must be adopted, “reinforcing the culture of dialogue and respect for all opinions that do not contradict the people’s faith or their civilisation heritage”.²¹¹ Within the general body of citizenry, it is necessary to “guarantee women’s rights and accomplish the legislative frameworks for supporting them and endeavor to enable women to contribute in social, economic and political development” as well as “highlighting the role of women in building the society”, albeit within an Islamic framework.²¹² In line with the choice of terms through which the list presented itself to voters – ‘reform’ and ‘change’ – Hamas indicates point by point what reforms are necessary and what change it envisages both in terms of the Islamist movement itself, and in terms of wider Palestinian society. From a certain point of view, it is from this document that according to some experts the new Hamas can be dated, a new, less revolutionary and more bureaucratic organization, a Hamas which would over the course of the following two years try – without success – to seek acceptance from the international community.

Hamas itself had already undergone the experience of the administration of those towns it had won control of at the ballot box during the 2005 municipal elections, an experience it can cash in on in its relations with international actors. In the months during which Hamas leads these municipalities, the common trait shared by all Islamist administrators is pragmatism. There are no ideological overtones, and aside from a few exceptions, no attempt to ride the wave of the Islamization in the main cities. Indeed, according to International Crisis Group experts, “pragmatism, and even willingness to deal with Israel on day-to-day operational affairs, Hamas rule at the local level has been almost boringly similar to its predecessor. Local politicians emphasise themes of good governance, economic development, and personal and social security, leaving specifically religious issues and the conflict with Israel to the background”.²¹³ The possible examples of those secret contacts between Israelis and representatives of the Islamist movement are many. One of the most indicative is the meeting between a Hamas administrator and an Israeli official which took place in the Jenin area: in a car, far from prying eyes, the

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 281.

²¹² Ibid., p. 286.

²¹³ International Crisis Group, “Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration”, *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 49, 18 January 2006, p. 1.

officials discussed how to deal with a problem which went beyond ideological and physical barriers, namely the threat of a bird flu epidemic which exactly during the first few months of 2006.

More than imposing, Hamas' mobilization around the Change and Reform list is capillary. It reaches the cities, the refugee camps, and the villages; it involves not only Gaza's entire social fabric, but – and this is where the real surprise comes – also all of the West Bank, from Nablus to east Jerusalem, from Hebron to Bethlehem. The campaign machinery is set in motion from the very moment candidates are selected: candidates do not put themselves forward for inclusion in the electoral list, but rather are selected by each group, by each cell. Each selected member may then freely accept or reject the candidacy, although – as Hamas activists themselves say – refusal is not a positive gesture, as it “means that one does not wish to serve the people”. The procedure of local candidate selection is one of the all but marginal reasons of Hamas' victory, because it was only those who were believed to be the best, the most dependable and most representative who were put forward for selection. Confirmation comes not only from the decisions taken by Hamas activists, but from the results obtained by the majority lists, which were the most faithful mirrors of local consensus. It was the electorate, which was certainly not made up purely of Islamist activists but rather by a silent majority who were not Hamas militants nor shared its ideological infrastructure, which rewarded the choice of candidates based on their respectability, their credibility, their honesty, and on what they had accomplished on the ground.

Political choices were then supported by a fully-fledged campaign machine, coordinated and administered by those who had already gained some experience in such matters. One of the most important names in the campaign's preparation was Farhat As'ad, whose experience came from his university days: between 1995 and 1996, for example, he had been the Hamas coordinator for all Palestinian universities and had planned and managed elections to student councils. On the surface, such a choice might appear at best limiting, even amateurish. But as Farhat As'ad himself says with the benefit of knowing other factions from the inside – particularly the Fatah youth leadership – having coordinated Second Intifada activities as well, “university elections had always been political”.²¹⁴ He knew both the opposition and the rationales they would follow well, just as he knew young Palestinians, who – unlike their counterparts in the West – constitute the largest portion of the electorate.²¹⁵ The results are plain for all to see in the last rounds of municipal elections between September and December of 2005: Hamas wins the West Bank urban centers which were traditionally considered Fatah's bastions, including the Christian-majority town of Bethlehem, the northern towns of Nablus and Jenin, also carrying the important Ramallah suburb of Al-Bireh, as well as Rafah, Beit Lahiya, and Al-Burej inside the Gaza Strip. Moreover, Hamas benefits from the organizational structure put to the test in its role as a clandestine organization, and which spans across the entire Palestinian Territory, reaching into villages, refugee camps, and even individual homes.

This preparatory work quickly becomes apparent inside Hamas' strongholds, such as Hebron, capital city of the southern West Bank, and a traditional constituency of the Muslim Brotherhood ever since the establishment of its earliest Palestinian branches. The

²¹⁴ Author's interview with Farhat As'ad, Ramallah, October 15th, 2008.

final rallies held two days before the legislative elections of January 25th, themselves give a sense of what Hamas had been able to achieve at its first electoral experience over the space of barely a few short months. Two brothers, Jibril and Nayef Rajoub, are the main contenders for support in the city. Speaking a short distance apart, Jibril is the strongman linked to the PNA's security apparatus in the West Bank. Listening to him, are the crowds of Fatah supporters in the large open area outside Hebron Polytechnic. Most of them – at least five thousand – are young, many are very young, with a few older figures in the crowd. All of them, however, share signs which mark them out as Fatah supporters: the Palestinian flag, a scarf echoing the keffiyeh, or perhaps one of the baseball caps which Fatah's electoral machine has distributed throughout town. There are very few women, however. The others, all the others, are on the outskirts of town, attending Hamas' final electoral rally, where those in attendance number in the tens of thousands, who have turned out to listen to shaykh Nayef Rajoub, Jibril's younger brother, who was one of the Change and Reform List's most prominent candidates. The women, who are there *en masse*, are wives, mothers and daughters, with their children in tow, or crammed into cars in which entire families have taken refuge. Women from the villages of Hebron's vast hinterland, women from cities, women like Samira Halaika, who would later become one of Hamas' Deputies. The vast majority are wearing a simple *hijab*, few don the *niqab* which also covers the face. Many brandish Hamas' green flag, and perhaps wear a Hamas cap. Women, in Hebron as elsewhere, have often been the key to Hamas' electoral success.

Chapter 6: Abul Abed's Double-Breasted Suit

The Day that Shook the PNA

The momentous day of the elections came without the silent guest who had, over the past five years, affected Palestinian politics so deeply. Ariel Sharon had exited the Israeli political scene in mid-December, felled by a stroke, only to vanish completely at the beginning of January 2006 when he enters the oblivion of an irreversible coma and thus a clinic for long-term patients in the Be'er Sheva area. Palestinians go to the polls while in Israel the post-Sharon transition is in full swing, guided by Ehud Olmert, one of his closest s, who not only has to take on his mantle as Prime Minister, but also guide the party Sharon had established – Kadima – through its troubled birth pangs. The Israeli weakness at the very time of the Palestinian elections makes the shadow cast by Israel over the elections appear less over-bearing. But it's just an illusion, one that lasts barely the length of that sunny winter morning during which, across the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, Palestinians celebrate democracy.

The head-to-head continues throughout day, up to the last voter, who crosses the threshold of the one thousand plus polling stations that have been set up. Participation is extremely high, with a constant flow of voters ever since the early hours of the morning: just short of a million Palestinians take part in the January 25th elections, 77 percent of those who have the right to vote. Eleven lists of candidates contest sixty-six seats elected under proportional representation, and a long list of four hundred and fourteen candidates vies for the other sixty-six seats appointed under a majority system. There are long, orderly lines which shape up outside the polling stations in West Bank, in Gaza, and even in East Jerusalem, where in some areas Palestinians can cast their vote only in front of an Israeli employee in the local postal office. There is a sense of duty bursting from every pore of the returning officers, punctilious in the fulfillment of their offices. There is an understated joy in those who have voted and can demonstrate, with barely-concealed pride, that finger marked with indelible ink, the sign that the ballot box contained their vote too. There is the patience of those tens of thousands of people who got through Israeli checkpoints dotted across the West Bank in order to reach their constituency, sometimes helped by international observers who arrived in their hundreds to witness the proper progress of the election. For Palestinians, January 25th, 2006 is a long sequence of these snapshots, a day of which everyone emphasizes the incredible sense of collective responsibility. In the memory of those who voted, the second general elections during the PNA's short history are still considered to be an important event: one of the few moments in which everyone, without exception, felt like a citizen, an arbiter of their own destiny, above and beyond the conflict. Despite the presence of the Hamas-chosen Change and Reform among those eleven lists, no one had prevented the elections from taking place, neither the EU nor the US. Israel had attempted to prevent or at least delay the vote in the

West Bank, which it had completely occupied during the Second Intifada, but ultimately *de facto* allowed the elections to take place.

Hamas had been accepted by the international community, by both the West and by Arab countries closest to the US. The Quartet had itself given its go-ahead in a meeting carried out beside to the General Assembly's in the UN's glass building in New York a few months before the elections. The UN's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Alvaro De Soto, later recalled how he agreed with the then UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, as well as his colleagues, amongst which the US Assistant Secretary of State David Welch, the EU's Marc Otte, and Alexander Kalugin of Russia. De Soto also recalled that "Abu Mazen's cooptation strategy was being endorsed" by inserting into the final part of the Quartet document a sentence that was not read in public. This sentence indicated that all parties should co-operate with what the Palestinians would decide, despite the fact that there was a fundamental contradiction between taking part in elections and controlling armed militias.²¹⁶ Cold statistics will then tell the story of the participation of eight hundred and thirty-two international observers present at the January 25th elections in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, of which one hundred and eighty-four from the European Union and one hundred and fifty from the United States, as well as a former US President who facilitated peace between Israel and Egypt (Jimmy Carter), a Prime Minister who was involved in international political intervention in Bosnia (Carl Bildt), former ambassadors, members of Western Parliaments, and so on. All eight hundred and thirty-two said that those Palestinian elections of January 25th, 2006 were so democratic as to be exemplary. No one had told the Palestinians that their right and duty to vote, their freedom to choose their own leadership would be conditional on its outcome. On the contrary, particularly by the Europeans, Hamas' presence was considered to be a fundamental step towards the co-option of the Islamist movement within democratic institutions with the publicly-declared objective of facilitating a gradual moderation of Hamas' more radical positions. It was on these basic premises that on that fateful day Palestinians thought they were entirely free to choose as they saw fit, to vote according to conscience, to put a cross next to their favorite candidate as one does in a democracy: freely and independently. In short, they felt entirely in charge of their own destiny, without diktats imposed by the international community, in what were considered by international monitors the freest, most democratic and fairest elections ever held in the history of the Middle East and of the Arab World. And on that day, defying all expectations, a majority of Palestinians voted for Hamas – defying all the experts, the pollsters, the journalists, and the observers, who up to the last moment refused to believe the result which came from the ballot boxes.

The following day, the counts begin to tell a different story, very different from the one which had been imagined up to that point. The official result published by the Central Electoral Committee and approved by hundreds of international observers from all over the world says Hamas won seventy-four seats, while only forty-five deputies will sit in Parliament to represent Fatah. Minor lists share the remaining thirteen seats. At its first showing in an election, Hamas obtains an astonishing result, winning fifty-six percent of seats in Parliament. For Fatah, a phase of harsh recriminations begins. Hamas,

²¹⁶ Alvaro De Soto, "End of Mission Report – Confidential", May 2007, <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2007/06/12/DeSotoReport.pdf>, pp. 15-16.

faces an equally difficult phase in which a movement that had always defined itself in terms of resistance and opposition now had to become a party of government.

To tell the truth, Hamas' electoral earthquake takes even its own leaders and activists by surprise. Just days before the elections, militants and cadres had shown great self-confidence. They were confident they could achieve a good result. Indeed, the projections which were being provided to journalists would have approached the actual outcome: a clear, decisive victory for the Islamist movement. But a more careful look reveals just how unexpected the result was for Hamas itself. None of the leaders has ever admitted this publicly, but privately they have confessed that they were the first to be surprised to find it was they who emerged victorious from the ballot. Ghazi Hamad, who is one of the most representative leaders of Hamas' pragmatic wing, implicitly confirmed as much in a letter he wrote outlining the reasons for his resignation from the post of spokesperson for the national unity government just after the June 2007 coup in Gaza. According to Hamad, during its period in government and in its political actions, "Hamas got extremely confused and experienced a lot of surprises because of an absence of planning and an absence of readiness for the rapid changes that were taking place".²¹⁷ Rapid changes, Hamad adds, to which the movement responded with "traditionalism and lethargy", because "Hamas did not change its ideas, its mode of work, or its beliefs".²¹⁸ In a later reflection on these events, Hamad goes further, explaining not only the emotional impact, but also the reasons for which, at a certain point, Hamas felt paralyzed by the victory: "With the 2005 watershed, we had decided to enter Parliament, we hadn't decided to enter the PNA".²¹⁹ In other words Hamas was neither interested in nor committed to enter government, they were interested purely in acting as an opposition. Hamad concludes: "This is why Hamas was confused. The time we had was too little for us to suddenly change our ideology, to balance ideology and politics, to be both resistance and Authority".²²⁰

It is certainly true that the vote defied the pollsters, that reality overtook the wildest expectation, but this reality begs the question: why did the Palestinian electorate decide to vote *en masse* for Hamas, punishing Fatah so utterly? The 2006 general election was not simply, nor even primarily a protest vote. This is the way it was interpreted by Western governments, and even by a considerable part of the media circus. Some, in good faith, thought that only a protest vote could lead a movement like Hamas to victory, a movement which would have led Palestinians to have to start all over again on a new and much more difficult path towards negotiation with the Israelis, going back to the drawing board with regard to the Palestinian National Authority and indeed the entire post-Oslo era. Others, with somewhat less good faith, used this explanation to feed Western politicians and public opinions the simplest – and most simplistic – possible interpretation of the way in which Palestinians exercised their rights as voters. Following – or at least using – this logic, the political actors which would later administer the boycott against the Hamas government and the progressive ostracization of the

²¹⁷ Citations are from a letter supposedly written by Ghazi Hamad after he stepped down from his post as the spokesperson of the national unity government, due to his opposition to the Hamas' coup in Gaza. The letter widely circulated at the time on different websites.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Author's interview with Ghazi Hamad, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

²²⁰ Ibid.

government which had emerged as a result of those elections on January 25th reached a conclusion which was as harsh as it was simplistic. The conclusion was that it was the very objective of ‘exporting democracy’ to the Arab world that needed to be reconsidered, not because one should not export democracy as a matter of principle, but because exported democracy has nearly always allowed Islamist movements to win.

What happened on January 25th, 2006, was different, very different indeed. Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza reached the ballots after having experimented with the use of their vote over the previous year. They were not, therefore, living a moment of collectively heightened emotions about seats, ballots, and indelible ink, because the vote was something they prized or because it was only a distant memory. They had elected Mahmoud Abbas exactly one year beforehand: the decision that Abu Mazen should succeed Yasser Arafat was not made only by Fatah’s or the Palestinian National Authority’s clients. Within that clear majority which had designated Abbas as PNA President, there were also sectors of society linked to Hamas. There was, in other words, a very specific political reason for which Palestinians voted for Hamas. It was a reason which pertains to the decisions formally taken by the Islamist movement on January 23rd, 2005: a unilateral truce, a truce agreed with the Islamic Jihad despite the fact that the latter would have broken it several times. This truce put a *de facto* end to the period of terrorist attacks carried out by Hamas inside Israel’s 1949 armistice borders.

The end of suicide bombings within Israeli cities, the substantive end of the Second Intifada, and Hamas’ choice in favor of participating in Palestinian electoral politics are interpreted by the Palestinian population as a specific *political proposal*: an alternative to those who have ruled you, who have dominated you thus far. In and of itself, this proposal in practice places new limits upon Hamas’ strategy for resistance. The Islamist movement was not, therefore, chosen simply as a protest against the corruption, clientelism and inefficiency of Fatah as a party which often blurred its boundaries with those of the PNA itself. This corruption, clientelism and inefficiency coincided – if nothing else, from a chronological point of view – with the failure of the peace plan traced in Oslo. It also coincided with the ‘facts on the ground’ the Israelis had established to the detriment of the geographical and political continuity of any future Palestinian state, namely the continuous expansion of settlements and the colonial project underpinning them. Hamas’ choice to take part in Palestinian electoral politics – a unilateral choice which it strictly adhered to – was taken by the Palestinian population as a signal that a new phase truly was emerging from the ashes of the Second Intifada and from Arafat’s death. In this phase, Hamas gains in political terms from its actions on the ground: armed confrontation with the Israelis, but in parallel also care for the weakest in society.

The Hamas leadership were regarded as honest people, people who had not enriched themselves at the people’s expense, and who on the contrary kept living in normal parts of town and in the refugee camps. Ismail Haniyeh’s case is exemplary in this sense: he lives in Gaza’s Shati refugee camp, home to many amongst Hamas’ middle generation, as well as, for a long time, to shaykh Ahmed Yassin. Indeed, despite the fact that many Hamas leaders speak of the *Mithaq* with embarrassment, the Charter itself contains indications of some of the moral practices which have been followed by at least three generations of activists and leaders. Article 21 says “It is a duty of [*sic*] all members of the Islamic Resistance Movement to share the people’s happiness and grief, and they

must consider it their duty to meet the demands of the people and to do what benefits them”.²²¹ It is precisely this presence within society, bringing together administration of public life and participation in that life which paradoxically mends precisely that fracture between state and civil society which scholars have often pointed at in Palestinian politics. It was a fracture between institutions and social networks, between a power structure which under Arafat was managed in a paternalistic and authoritarian manner and a network of organizations which constitutes an entirely parallel reality. It is Moussa Abu Marzouq who offers just such an interpretation in a surprising interview with the *Washington Post* barely a week after the electoral victory decreed by ballot boxes across the West Bank and Gaza. He defines the electoral result as “a grass-roots alternative grew out of the urgency of this situation”.²²² The second in command in Hamas’ political bureau abroad therefore confirms the theory of the ‘twin track’ approach which the organization took to the question of political participation in the West Bank and Gaza after the Oslo Accords took force. From the birth of the Palestinian National Authority until the January 2006 elections there have been two ways of taking part in public life: within the PNA structure, and therefore from inside the power system established by Yasser Arafat, or alternatively within civil society. In Palestine, this means a complex structure of non-governmental organizations, charities, trade unions, professional orders, women’s rights associations, local committees dotted across the land which might be secular or religiously inspired organizations, progressive or conservative. Often they emerged during the First Intifada, they grew over the following two decades, and had flexible relations with the National Authority itself. At certain stages, this dichotomy between civil society and PNA institutions also coincided with the division between Palestinian society left inside the West Bank and Gaza after the wars of 1948 and 1967 on the one hand, and the elites returning from exile in Arafat’s tow to take up the most important positions of power within the National Authority on the other.

Although Abu Marzouq himself belongs to those exiled elites, just like the majority of PLO members – particularly from Fatah – who arrived in the Occupied Territory in 1994, he nonetheless understands one of the most important factors in explaining what happened on January 25th, 2006. It was precisely that civil society, the tip of an iceberg of the silent Palestinian majority which had lived all the stages of Palestinian history after 1948 from the inside, from the West Bank and Gaza, which gave Hamas the chance to govern. Why? In his *Washington Post* article, Abu Marzouq argues that Hamas was seen as “a positive social force striving for the welfare of all Palestinians” because of “its legacy of social work and involvement in the needs of the Palestinian people”. He also provides a sense of the deep ideological change afoot in Hamas when he describes the “heart of the mandate” for the deputies elected in the Change and Reform list as to “alleviate the debilitating conditions of occupation, and not [establishing] an Islamic state”.²²³

It is as though, through the January 2006 elections, Hamas had come full circle and returned to being the Muslim Brotherhood, shedding the fatigues of a revolutionary movement and once again replacing them with a double-breasted suit. Harkening back to social conditions on the ground, as Abu Marzouq has done, is crucial because it recalls

²²¹ Hamas Charter reprinted in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, op. cit., p. 280.

²²² Moussa Abu Marzouq, “What Hamas is Seeking”, *Washington Post*, January 31st, 2006.

²²³ Abu Marzouq, *ibid.*

the Palestinian Ikhwan's politics particularly in the post-1967 period, when the Muslim Brotherhood under shaykh Ahmed Yassin decided to focus on the shaping of 'good Muslims', on the educational sector and on social networks in order to consolidate the movement's roots. The heritage which Abu Marzouq recalls comes back to the fore while again emphasizing the dichotomy between Fatah as a party-*cum*-state on the one hand, and the opposition on the other. This opposition had chosen to grow and to seek representation within civil society organizations alone, to the point that even in referring to secular groups and NGOs, some people say that "civil society is the opposition".²²⁴ In this definition, which at first sight might appear too simplistic, one finds the key to understanding the 2006 elections: this was not a protest vote, unless one thinks of it as a way of 'grading' the PNA leadership and those parts of Fatah which do not find their *raison d'être* in their relationship with the base and with popular consensus.

Hamas vs. Fatah

An old family car proceeds slowly along the narrow road winding around the perimeter wall of the Muqata, the Presidential palace where Yasser Arafat rests and in which Abu Mazen resides. The car attempts to make its way through the jungle of cameras, microphones and reporters from all over the world. The driver is not used to Ramallah, nor – in this case – is he used to the power centers of the PNA, the epitome of which is the Muqata itself, which still bears the scars of the Israeli siege in 2002 on its walls and in its large courtyard. The Muqata is the place where the Palestinian Parliament is sworn in on February 18th, inaugurating its second legislature. This is the Parliament of Hamas' electoral revolution. The car's windows cannot conceal the disoriented looks on the passengers' faces – men only, in this case – crammed into the seats, beards neatly trimmed and dressed in their best suits for the occasion. The women follow soon after on other cars. These are the Islamist deputies who arrive, supremely punctual, at the Presidential palace to take part in the Parliament's inaugural first sitting. On their faces – a little lost, but not at all cowed – are the looks of those who are about to enter a political game they are not used to, which is also made of a particular code of conduct, of a certain care in one's presentation, and of the rules of protocol. Not to mention power. Hamas' new deputies are not used to the circus that is politics, just as they are not used to the assault of journalists who are waiting for them *en masse* outside the gates of the Muqata's back entrance. The journalists are there for them, because Hamas' representatives are the only novelty in an assembly which – on the basis of the composition and performance of its predecessor – would not have otherwise attracted much interest outside Ramallah. Newcomers to the Parliamentary game, the new deputies betray the embarrassment which grips all those who are about to take such a step into the unknown, as well as what they call their spirit of service towards the Palestinian community. It might be difficult to comprehend for a Westerner, but in the eyes of the new deputies there is a deep respect for the responsibilities which come with the role of a parliamentarian.

Hamas deputies are new to this kind of life, but they are certainly not naïve. Parsing the list of those who have been elected to the second Palestinian legislature in the

²²⁴ Nathan J. Brown, *Palestinian Politics after the Oslo Accords. Resuming Arab Palestine*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003, p. 144.

West Bank reveals a kind of catalogue of Islamist activism: technicians, businesspeople, university professors, teachers, preachers, ordinary citizens, and a small contingent of women. While most are elected primarily because of the 'pink quotas', some are also symbols of that Islamist feminism which has taken root over the last few years across the Arab world, Palestine included. Many of these members of parliament have been Hamas militants ever since the establishment of the operational arm of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. The 'elder statesman' of the group is Abdel Fattah al-Dukhan, who had taken part in the founding meeting on December 9th, 1987, at Ahmed Yassin's house, and who is considered the author of the 1988 Charter. A dozen deputies lived through the Marj al-Zuhour deportation episode, while others represent a younger generation, the one which entered politics during the first twelve years of the PNA's life. In a Ramallah blessed with a brilliant sun and swept by the sharp wind of a Palestinian winter, the detachment of men and women elected in the Change and Reform list is the first to arrive. They reached the city the previous night, and have chosen to undergo the twists and turns of the dozens upon dozens of kilometers of hills around the West Bank in order to avoid the checkpoints. From Nablus, from Hebron, from Jenin, from Bethlehem, from all their constituencies the virtual distance is barely half an hour's car ride, an hour at the most, but the West Bank is dotted with hundreds of Israeli roadblocks which split the land, and the deputies have chosen to avoid unpleasant surprises. The rumor which won't go away is that the Israeli army has decided to block Hamas' parliamentarians, preventing them from arriving on time for the Parliament's inaugural session and President Abbas' speech.

Those fears of a boycott by Ehud Olmert's government are all but unfounded: there are several absences that day in Ramallah. Of course, those held in Israeli prisons who were elected to Parliament are missing – a group which includes headlining names such as Marwan Barghouthi and the PFLP leader Ahmed Saadat who is held in a Palestinian jail in Jericho before being captured by the Israeli military in a raid on the prison the following month. But it's not just the incarcerated who are missing. Amongst the absences, the most visible are the ones of Hamas' deputies from Gaza, whom the Israeli authorities have prevented from traveling to Ramallah. Gaza's Fatah deputies, on the other hand, have been allowed to travel. The Strip grows ever more distant from the West Bank, its only connection now a videoconferencing link between Ramallah and Gaza City, confining part of the Assembly into a pen – Gaza – isolated from the rest of the world. After the Israeli withdrawal in August 2005, the Strip is farther away, surrounded as it is by a *cordon sanitaire* that closes it off not just along the two land borders it shares with Israel, but also on the southern border at Rafah. This last Gazan town before the Sinai is the gateway to Egypt, where the European Union's monitoring group lead by Italian Carabinieri (EUBAM) is deployed following the international agreement sponsored in November 2005 by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Those absences from Ramallah's Muqata, just like the videoconference which introduces the new members of the Palestinian legislature to each other, provide a clear signal of what is happening. They immediately make clear the difficulties which an Assembly cleft apart will face, both geographically and politically, just as politics generally will in the Palestinian National Authority during Mahmoud Abbas' Presidency. President Abbas himself decides to skip formalities and go straight to the heart of the matter: Hamas' entry into the PNA. The President confirms as much specifying that the

Islamist movement itself, which had won the elections, will be given the task of forming a government, with all that this entails at the level of economic reform, of managing security organizations and a range of other matters, including relations with Israel and with the international community. Despite the fact that negotiations over the formation of the new government are still going nowhere, Abu Mazen clearly states he intends to safeguard these international links by living up to the commitments undertaken in the 'road map', in order to protect the PNA from the increasing isolation of Palestinians which Israel is attempting to bring about.

Israel's is a pre-emptive pressure, which from the outset relies on what is considered the most effective weapon, the one the consequences of which are most immediate: the economic and financial blockade of the Territory. The blockade had to all intents and purposes begun already in January with the failure to pass over to the PNA the taxation which, according to the Paris Protocol attached to the Oslo Accords, Israel should collect on the Authority's behalf. Israel also prevented about four thousand workers from entering the country from Gaza. Tel Aviv decides to freeze the roughly fifty million dollars in monthly taxation payments, only to unfreeze them a few days later, in February, because Hamas is not yet in power. In doing this, the Israelis are following a practice already established during the Second Intifada, when they would turn the tap of resources on and off at will. The message is clear: Israel is not willing to tolerate a government of which Hamas is a part, least of all an executive lead by the members of the Islamist movement. But that's not all.

Already in February rumors circulate about the new strategy taking shape in government circles, not just in Israel but in the US as well. The idea is simple, and is perfectly in line with the Bush Administration's Middle East policy after the objective failure of its first phase, during which it attempted to export democracy to the Arab world. If the Arabs – in this case, Palestinians – are unable to use the instruments of Western-style democracy to choose secular governments friendly to the West, if they rather choose their representatives from the ranks of political Islam, then democratic practices must be channeled into directions more congenial to the wishes of Washington and its allies. Using tried and tested methods such as regime change, despite the fact that it had always proven a failure during the second half of the Twentieth century in the Middle East. As they had done with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and as in the classic case of the CIA intervention against Mossadeq's liberal revolution in Iran in the Fifties, the US decides that Hamas must also be overthrown. Regardless of the fact that it had obtained a mandate from a majority of Palestinians in elections which the very same George W. Bush above all others had demanded. Hamas had received consensus without coercion, as international observers had witnessed. This consensus should have told Americans and Israelis a long story about the flawed politics of the first twelve years of PNA government, about the way in which humanitarian aid had been handled, and not least about the mistakes made at the very outset in the peace process traced at Oslo.

The strategy of strangling Hamas, of boycotting the PNA while it attempted to find a way of sharing power between secularists and Islamists, however, meets with not the slightest of hesitations. Already in February, before any government at all even has time to emerge from the new balance of Palestinian political power, the *New York Times* speaks of decisions being made in Washington's back rooms. It is an exclusive which precedes even the very first sitting of the Legislative Council in Ramallah, and it comes

straight from Jerusalem: according to the most prestigious American newspaper, the United States and Israel are considering ‘destabilizing’ the future Hamas government by strangling the PNA economically. The strategy is simple: no money to the Palestinians, in order to force President Mahmoud Abbas to call new elections and bring about a Fatah victory. Were it just a throw-away suggestion, it wouldn’t be a scoop. But according to Steven Erlanger, who signs the article, it is the highest echelons of the US State Department and of the Israeli government which are debating the strategy. Confirmation is indirect. A few hours later, Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, speaking after a meeting with Husni Mubarak, places Palestine lead by Hamas squarely within the ‘Axis of Evil’, alongside Iran, Syria and Hizbullah, in that order. In the meantime, Israeli Supreme Court vice-president Michael Cheshin states that the PNA is by now a “*de facto* enemy state”. Tel Aviv, in short, proceeds with the strategy Ehud Olmert had indicated ever since the day after the Palestinian elections, the strategy explained to the international community by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in her international tour begun in Cairo and concluded in Washington on the even of the first sitting of the Palestinian Parliament.

The *New York Times* scoop would be only the first in a long list of leaks throughout 2006 which would soon become full-blown scenarios elaborated by the various actors in this play. It was primarily the US’ diplomacy and its military, although less so its intelligence services, who on several occasions indicate that they fear the failure of Washington’s involvement in Palestinian internal affairs. According to these plans, from the outset the key to Hamas’ fall is Fatah, even more than it is the bureaucratic structure of the PNA before the advent of Hamas. Fatah, in its role as party-*cum*-state, should be the political group which should replace Hamas. To do this, the idea that Hamas had won the elections had to be undermined. Ever since the day after the January 25th elections one therefore finds two interpretations of the election’s results, in Palestine as much as elsewhere. The first, the most linear, is that Hamas won the elections by a clear margin. The second, competing explanation was that Hamas only received a greater number of preferences because the secular front had reached the ballot divided, and that it had been damaged by the mixed electoral system – a system which, incidentally, Hamas had had no part in choosing. This second interpretation was based on one indisputable fact, namely that Fatah had been fragmented up until the very last days before the election, just as it had been over the course of the past few years under Arafat. Fatah was split between cadres which had come to the fore during the First Intifada on the one hand and the old ‘Tunisians’ on the other, between the youths of the Second Intifada and the corrupt bureaucrats in Ramallah, between the base exposed to the winds of change sweeping through Palestine, and the stultified establishment. This split could not be resolved save through the technicalities of the electoral law or the composition of individual lists of candidates, because it was so deep that it could be dealt with only through the cleansing of a General Congress. Fatah, however, had been unable to organize the Sixth Congress over the previous seventeen years, not least because of an inextricable mire of reciprocal vetos.

Thus, Fatah had lost, it had lost clearly both the electoral test and the test of internal reform. Yet none of its leaders really admitted defeat. On the one hand, this was because such an admission would have meant driving the crisis even deeper. On the other hand, however, this was also because the international community had always accepted –

if not even directly dictated – the more benevolent and technical explanation of the result on January 25th, even pushing Fatah itself to support such an interpretation. In political practice, the implication of such a revisionist position was that from the very beginning Fatah never seriously sought a compromise with Hamas in order to overcome the aftershocks of the Islamists’ success, allowing itself to be seduced by the (international) Sirens which predicted the fall of Hamas as soon as it had been ‘tainted’ by power. At the same time, the Islamist movement was faced with reconstructing its strategy within the PNA entirely from scratch, no longer as a parliamentary opposition, but as a party of government. In its report on the Palestinian situation in mid-2006, the International Crisis Group would state that “Fatah, unable to fully accept its electoral loss, has continued to act as if it remains in power, treating the new government as usurpers, temporarily in possession of positions and institutions that are rightfully its own” while Hamas, “unprepared for its parliamentary triumph and even less to govern alone, has behaved as if it were still in opposition, relying on political posturing and denunciations of subversive plots as substitutes for hard decision-making.”²²⁵

The struggle between Hamas and the West, as much as between Hamas and Fatah, begins immediately, and is played out on several different fronts. Two are decisive for the way in which one of the most difficult – and most controversial – chapters in recent Palestinian history would play out between 2006 and 2007. The first is the front of the international funding the PNA receives, and of the economic blockade which would soon be in place. The second front, one which is only apparently merely internal to Palestinian politics, is the administration of the security and of the use of force within the West Bank and Gaza. In parallel, there is a confrontation with Hamas which takes place on the media and which centers on the question of the Islamist movement’s recognition of Israel, since the 1988 *Mithaq* was never modified. However, it is on the question of funding that immediate pressure concentrates. The Quartet is a multilateral consultation group on the Middle East established in 2002 during one of the most violent phases of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in order to breathe new life into the ‘two-state solution’ through the US-devised *road map*, a peace process which the PNA and Israel must adhere to in order to reach their objective. Within the Quartet, the US has a preponderant role, leaving both Russia and the EU with much ambiguity over their roles but very little room to maneuver. Much the same was true of the UN, which over the course of the following two years would see the more or less controversial resignations of its various Middle East envoys. It is the US in particular which pushes for the Quartet to use the instrument of international funding in order to demand that the PNA adhere to existing agreements, even if Hamas were to lead the new government, while knowing full well that the Authority’s very existence depends on the considerable help forthcoming from abroad. After the disaster of the Second Intifada and the ensuing military re-occupation of the West Bank, the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the increasing isolation of the Strip, and not least the twelve years spanning the PNA’s existence marked by a corrupt and clientelistic administration of public life, it is not surprising that Palestinian finances and the economy are in a miserable state. A deficit of at least seven hundred million dollars which grows seemingly unstoppably, not least as a result of Israel’s failure to pass on taxation revenues. It is precisely on this point that the pressure which Israel has

²²⁵ International Crisis Group, “Palestinians, Israel and the Quartet: Pulling Back from the Brink”, *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 54, June 13th, 2006, p. 2.

resolved to exert is applied, initiated by the interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who delays the payment of the funds due to the PNA, including tariffs and taxation. The measure provokes harsh reactions from both the Palestinian Authority and from the UN Middle East Envoy Alvaro de Soto, although these remain without consequences.

At the same time, the Quartet begins to move. Already on January 30th, after having “congratulated the Palestinian people on an electoral process that was free, fair and secure,” the Quartet approves a document which places three conditions which any future government will be expected to meet. With a formulation which only formally is neither an ultimatum or a threat of sanction, the Quartet is firm in the demands it makes of its interlocutor. The document says that the Palestinian people has the “right to expect that a new Government will address their aspirations for peace and Statehood”, and welcomes the “President Abbas’ affirmation that the Palestinian Authority is committed to the Road Map, previous agreements and obligations between the parties, and a negotiated two-State solution”. However, the Quartet changes its language when it clarifies that as far as the consultation body on the Middle East comprising UN, US, EU and Russia is concerned, it imposes the condition that “all members of a future Palestinian Government must be committed to non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the *road map*.” Then, the corollary: “It was inevitable that future assistance to any new government would be reviewed by donors against that Government’s commitment” to respect the three conditions. For the PNA, that word, “assistance”, means everything. It means the enormous amount of funding which the US but more especially the EU provide for the Authority, an Authority which often ends up acting merely as a kind of accountant, handing out aid, since the Palestinian economy cannot stand on its own two feet, but is forced to rely on international assistance. In this way, the international community demonstrates how completely unprepared it was to elaborate a more sophisticated and less superficial strategy after the changes which in the space of barely five months had radically changed the political landscape of the Middle East, with Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza, the sudden departure of Ariel Sharon from the political scene, and finally Hamas’ unexpected victory. As one of the participants in such meetings, Alvaro de Soto himself confirmed that the Quartet’s line is decided by the United States, whose representatives, Elliot Abrams and David Welch, go so far as to imply that had the UN not acquiesced the US’ funding to the UN itself might be threatened.²²⁶

The fifty million dollars in monthly revenue which Israel would decide to freeze towards the end of February represent a considerable portion of a Palestinian budget which passes on to the new Prime Minister a continuously rising deficit of around seven hundred million dollars. The revenues from taxation amount to about a third of total incomings, and are used mainly to pay the salaries of the one hundred and forty thousand PNA employees – including the fifty-eight thousand on the payroll of various security bodies – accounting for the incomes of around one fifth of the population. Israeli and later international pressure have a specific target, before a Hamas government is even formed: the petit bourgeoisie linked to the PNA, which is thought to be the true weak link and the pivotal element of popular malcontent. By linking aid to respecting the three conditions indicated in the January 30th declaration, the Quartet immediately traces a line Palestinians cannot cross, indicating shortly after the elections the confines within which

²²⁶ Alvaro De Soto, “End of Mission Report – Confidential”, op. cit., p. 18.

Palestinian sovereignty is restricted. Politics in Ramallah and in Gaza City is channeled within very clearly defined and non-negotiable borders, in a way which would immediately influence the negotiations between parties concerning the establishment of a new government. These restrictions would also affect the actions of Abu Mazen's Presidency, which from that moment onwards moves along two different paths. On the one hand, there is the problematic relationship with Hamas, which until the June 2007 take-over by the Islamist movement in Gaza, would receive several ultimatums from Mahmoud Abbas. On the other hand, the continuation of a distinct policy aimed at strengthening the Presidency so as to make it a center of power which might provide an alternative to those parts of the PNA which would be run by Hamas after the result of the elections, particularly as far as relations with the West are concerned. This twin-track policy has its core in the management of security bodies, and begins precisely at the moment official results are declared, on January 28th, when Mahmoud Abbas orders the main armed groups, preventive security, police and intelligence services to report to him and not to the Prime Minister or the Minister for the Interior. This deprives Hamas of one of the pillars of executive power. But this is only the first change in the running of Palestinian security organizations, changes which will paradoxically move Abu Mazen towards the positions held by Arafat, particularly in 2003. At that time, Arafat had not wanted to relinquish control of security organizations to the executive chaired by Abbas himself, who had handed in his resignation precisely after losing the battle for control of the armed groups. The problem was real: the Second Intifada had caused their proliferation, and the fragmentation of the West Bank – carried out by the Israeli Army – had accelerated the decentralization of these apparatuses, led by small, young local warlords, and concentrated primarily in the northern areas, Nablus and Jenin above all.

The message conveyed by the international community is clear: there is only one person with whom it wishes to speak, Abu Mazen, and it is not prepared to entertain relations with Hamas, whose power must be diminished to the point that it will become – so to speak – innocuous. But it is precisely this agreement to exclude Hamas which diminishes Mahmoud Abbas' role, and more especially which creates increasingly serious problems within Palestinian society as time goes by. The fact that Mahmoud Abbas is so clearly and extensively supported by the West after Palestinians had democratically invested Hamas with executive power within the PNA weakens Abbas. With the obvious exclusion of his clients, of security bodies linked to Fatah, and to the Presidential office, Palestinians increasingly perceive him as being supine to the will of an international community which for its part refuses to recognize the legitimately elected government, if Hamas does not accept the conditions imposed by the Quartet. At any rate, Abbas accepts this role, and for a start, he keeps the security organizations linked to the Presidency on a short leash, egged on not least by the s around him. First and foremost among these is Muhammad Dahlan, who is viewed with increasing ill-favor by Hamas just as he is held in increasingly high regard in certain Western circles. Before even conferring an exploratory mandate to Hamas in order to form the new executive, on February 20th, Abbas attempts to further concentrate his control of the use of force in the Presidency by reshuffling the upper echelons of the security establishment, with serious implications for relations between Hamas and Fatah. A few hours before meeting Ismail Haniyeh, the man who Hamas has indicated as possible Prime Minister, Abbas reinforces the powers of the new person in charge of preventive security, whose field of action has

ever since mid-2005 included not just Gaza but also the West Bank: Rashid Abu Shbak. Abu Shbak is Fatah's strongman in the Strip, but more importantly he is the right hand man of one of those who is closest to Abbas, namely Dahlan, who in this way can control internal security from a distance. Thus, consultations for the birth of the Hamas government are undertaken in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion, trenches already dug, sinking the idea – which the Islamist movement had been cultivating – of building a coalition which might be as wide as possible, and which would have included Fatah, before it even had a chance.

Swords into governments

Every now and then, there are episodes in a person's life which look a lot like history dealing out turning the tables. Ismail Haniyeh was thirty-four years old and was known to few outside Hamas circles in Gaza when in 1996 he put himself forward as an independent in the first elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. That candidacy was quickly withdrawn after barely a few days, and perhaps the provocation had won him that role of bridge between the Islamist movement and the PNA which so many speak of. Not as important as the role which Ismail Abu Shanab had taken on over the course of those very same years, but Haniyeh's relations with Fatah members are certainly good, and his job of maintaining contacts between the Authority and the office of shaykh Ahmed Yassin had helped that particular strand of Hamas' multi-layered strategy. This strategy was not to seek out confrontation with the *sulta*. Rather, it kept open a channel through which much took place, including, at times, fully-fledged collaboration on particular issues which concerned the immediate needs of the Palestinian people. Exactly ten years after that candidature put forward as a provocation and then withdrawn, Ismail Haniyeh becomes the symbol – perhaps more for the Western media than for Islamist militants – of what Hamas might become. Hamas in a suit, which might even overcome international ostracism and, with a little effort, come to be accepted. Abul Abed, as everyone calls him in Gaza, has built a good name for himself. Starting from his own home, the Shati refugee camp, where his family arrived in 1948 after fleeing from the village of al-Joura, near Ashkelon, also home to shaykh Yassin, whose assistant Haniyeh was from 1997 to his assassination in 2004. Ismail Haniyeh has lived in Shati – the 'beach camp', as its name says – ever since 1962. "I was born here, I was raised here, I walked the streets here. I must stay with my people" he said to Katrin Raub, a journalist with the Associated Press²²⁷, explaining why he had kept living in the small three-storey building with his family, his wife, his thirteen children, his brother, and his cousins, his uncle and so on all around him, amongst the narrow alleys of the refugee camps, with the sea nearby. Ashkelon is just about visible in the distance, barely fifteen kilometers away. There, in the refugee camp bordering the beach, Haniyeh has lived with his family thanks to a meager UNRWA monthly contribution. Shati is also home to the future Prime Minister's home: a large but unadorned house. Abul Abed's work desk is inside the bedroom, with a side table, his computer and the television nearby. Shati is where Haniyeh decides to stay, near the sea, as the neighbor who supplies adjacent houses with

²²⁷ "Hamas' down-home prime minister most popular Palestinian politician despite strife-ridden year", USA Today, 23 February 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-02-23-hamas-leader_x.htm.

electricity from his generator. He stays there even after Hamas had – in an announcement met with a certain surprise – indicated him as a potential Prime Minister, and even after Mahmoud Abbas charged him with trying to form a new government nearly a month after the elections.

By betting on Haniyeh, therefore, Hamas chose the most political but also the most symbolic name it could find. A rather new face, unknown to Western audiences, despite his work in Yassin's office. But most of all he was a figure who had yet to draw upon himself the extremely harsh attacks which the Israelis had launched upon Khaled Meshaal, or Mahmoud A-Zahhar in Gaza itself: Ismail Haniyeh is the most expendable name in Hamas' Gazan leadership, which after the killing of Yassin and Rantisi was said to consist in a triad comprising A-Zahhar, Said Siyyam and Haniyeh himself. Despite being considered Hamas' moderate face, Abul Abed still sports a curriculum typical of a Hamas activist of his generation. Haniyeh enters the Muslim Brotherhood during the course of his studies in the Department of Arabic at the Islamic University in Gaza, he heads the Islamist student bloc during the mid 1980s, and later takes part in the First Intifada, spending six months in an Israeli jail in 1988, only to be again arrested the following year and sentenced to three years in jail. Haniyeh is also part of the group of prisoners deported to Marj al-Zuhour in 1992, and after his return he works closely with Yassin. Indeed, he is with Hamas' spiritual leader during the first attempt on his life, on September 6th, 2003.

The original idea – at least, this is the version provided by Hamas' leadership in exile – is not to establish a government on its own. On the contrary, the first effort goes towards building a coalition government which might allow the Islamist movement a gradual entry into the halls of power. The first to be surprised by the margin of the January victory, in fact, is Hamas itself. The Islamist movement had been prepared to enter Parliament, and to take on the mantle of a constructive opposition to the established power of Fatah within the National Authority. Indeed, Hamas was ready to set out on the road towards internal reform of the PNA and the PLO – starting with the Legislative Council – by passing new laws, and through an increasingly effective control over *sulta*'s administrative actions. It had studied this case carefully. It had studied its role in opposition so carefully, in fact, that it had described it in great detail in the Change and Reform List's electoral manifesto. Reform and change which were to be implemented from within Parliament, certainly not from the executive branch of the PNA. These forecasts, these short- and medium-term programs, however, become meaningless the day after the elections in the brief time between the wildly mistaken exit polls of the previous evening, and the counting of actual votes carried out the morning after, and which decree Hamas' victory. The Islamist movement finds itself in power, with the enthusiasm of Palestinians in the streets, still incredulous about just how much they influenced the balance of power within the PNA, with a solid majority behind them, but with no experience at all in the administration of the *sulta*. As Ghazi Hamad explains, using an apt comparison: "After the victory in 2006, we had no other choice but to form a government. It was a bit like changing tires on a racing car mid-race".²²⁸

Within the leadership, the first reaction is to push for a coalition administration. Two or three days after the January electoral victory, Hamas puts forward the idea of a national unity government. Specifically, it is Khaled Meshaal himself who speaks of this

²²⁸ Author's interview with Ghazi Hamad, Gaza City, October 26th, 2008.

possibility with Mahmoud Abbas directly, offering him a ‘President’s government’. Abu Mazen does not discard the offer, indeed he calls it “a good idea, one which we should work on”.²²⁹ The Hamas leadership interprets this response as Abbas simply wishing to procrastinate to the point of making the Hamas attempt fail, so that Abu Mazen himself would then appear as the only personality who, at that point, would be capable of rescuing both Palestinians and Hamas. Confirmation of this interpretation comes from the story which Alvaro De Soto tells. His confidential end of mission report was handed in a year later, in May of 2007 alongside his resignation, and was an impassioned, extremely harsh indictment, brushing nothing under the carpet, and portraying a frustrating picture of what the international community consciously did in order to prevent a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and to avoid that Hamas might be put in a position to soften its stance. Coincidentally, De Soto’s entire memorandum would be sent to *The Guardian* in mid-June, just as the last battle for control of the Strip was ranging. De Soto, a UN official with much experience – “twenty-five years plus a few days in the United Nations” as he writes with more than a little irritation – has from the outset lived through the untold history, the behind-the-scenes of the post-Arafat period, from June 2005 up to the eve of the Hamas takeover in Gaza, two years later. De Soto accuses: “A national unity government with a compromise platform along the lines of [the] Mecca [Agreement in February 2007] might have been achieved soon after the election, in February or March of 2006, had the US not led the Quartet to set impossible demands, and opposed a NUG [national unity government] in principle”.²³⁰ More than that, the UN official recalls that: “at the time, and indeed until the Mecca agreement a year later, the US clearly pushed for a confrontation between Fatah and Hamas.”²³¹

Hamas, however, does not give up. Consultations continue, both before and after the official mandate has been given to Ismail Haniyeh. Several names had been put forward for the position of Prime Minister over the course of the weeks before Haniyeh himself would be formally named as Prime Minister, especially businessmen from Gaza and from the West Bank – Jamal al-Khoudari and Mazen Sinnokrot, for example – who were well-known for their good relations with the international community. Hamas, however, concentrates on the most political name it can find, and although it is a moderate one, it fails in its attempts to convince other Palestinian political parties. Many explanations are put forward for this failure: there are those such as Khaled Hroub – one of the most respected experts on Hamas’ documents – who ascribes the lack of agreement on a political program for the Hamas-backed government to two factors: “Hamas’ failure to acknowledge the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and its refusal to subscribe to the UN resolutions on Palestine and Israeli-PLO agreements”.²³² However, there are also others, such as Ziad Abu Amr, later Foreign Minister of the 2007 national unity government as well as one of the most important scholars on Palestinian political Islam, who attributes the failure to Hamas’ inability to be more flexible in giving away certain posts. In Abu Amr’s words “when it talks about power-sharing, it means something that won’t take away its decision-making power. [...

²²⁹ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

²³⁰ Alvaro De Soto, “End of Mission Report – Confidential”, op. cit., p. 21.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Khaled Hroub, “A ‘New Hamas’ through Its New Documents”, in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 140, summer 2006, pp. 6-27.

Hamas] could have compromised far more easily now with its big majority [in parliament]”.²³³ One fact remains interesting regardless: the program for the national unity government which Hamas puts before the other parties represented in the new Parliament as well as to Islamic Jihad contains none of the anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli rhetoric of the 1988 Charter, and attempts to open a channel with the international community, especially through two articles, 9 and 10 (out of 39), both dealing with the question of respect for agreements with Israel and of UN Resolutions. Furthermore, other parts of the document refer to Palestine exclusively as the territory within the Green Line, albeit retaining the ambiguity necessary to maintain the support of its militants and to avoid caving in completely before the demands made by the Quartet.²³⁴

As for the rest, the government’s objectives are the same one finds in the electoral manifesto: fighting corruption, defending weaker parts of society, great importance given to welfare, and the obvious attempt to reassure its secular counterparts in Palestinian society. Specifically in Article 6, the government undertakes to “build a society and institutions on democratic foundations that guarantee justice, equal participation, and political pluralism; stress the rule of law with complete separation between powers where the independence of the judiciary should be guaranteed and human rights and basic liberties protected”²³⁵ All this is not enough to convince the other parties, not even the left represented by the Popular Front, which, in a move which would have been unbelievable barely a few years beforehand, more than other groups had been willing to enter into government with Hamas. The idea of a coalition having failed, the Islamist movement must resign itself to form a government on its own. In the recollections of the Hamas leadership, even the circles closest to Abu Mazen believed that Ismail Haniyeh would meet Abbas merely to inform him of his failure, of the fact that he had been unable to form an executive. They also recall how Abbas himself was surprised when Haniyeh instead set out on a forty-minute speech and in the end presented not his letter of resignation, but a list of twenty-four ministers in his single-party government, a list which included leaders of the Islamist movement, deputies elected in the Change and Reform list, and independents considered close to Hamas.

This is the government of experts, as it is labeled by some, because amongst the team there are university professors, professionals with doctorates pursued in Western – often American – universities, as well as specialists, technical experts, intellectuals and lawyers. The Minister of Finance is Omar Abdel Razeq, with a doctorate from the University of Iowa in International Economics and Mathematical Economics, and a career as Professor of Economics at Al-Najah University. With these credentials, Abdel Razeq is the archetype of the Hamas government minister. At nearly fifty, Abdel Razeq is from the same generation as Haniyeh himself, the new Interior Minister Said Siyyam, and many other colleagues. In particular, like many of those who make up the higher echelons

²³³ Wendy Kristianasen, “Palestine: Hamas besieged”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2006, <http://mondediplo.com/2006/06/03hamas>.

²³⁴ Article 9 states that the “government will deal with the signed agreements [between the PLO/PA and Israel] with high responsibility and in accordance with preserving the ultimate interests of our people and maintaining its rights without compromising its immutable prerogatives”. The following article, number 10, states that “The government will deal with the international resolutions [on the Palestine issue] with national responsibility and in accordance with protecting the immutable rights of our people” in Khaled Hroub “A ‘New Hamas’ through Its New Documents”, op. cit..

²³⁵ Ibid.

of the cabinet, he has a very respectable academic track record. Analogously, Health Minister Bassam Na'im is a doctor at the large Gaza City hospital of Shifa, and has a degree from a German university as well as a doctorate. Samir Abu Eisheh, Minister for Planning, is a professor of engineering at Nablus University. Another seven ministers are also engineers: Jamal al-Khodari, charged with Communications and New Technologies; Ala al-Din al-Araj is the businessman appointed to the Treasury; Joudeh George Murkos – the only Christian in the team – becomes Minister for Tourism; as well as the Minister for Public Works Abdel Rahman Zeidan, the Transport Minister Ziad al-Thatah, the Chief of Staff Muhammad Awad, deputy director of the Islamic University, and Khaled Abu Arafah, who had become a small businessman. The list continues with the Minister for Information Youssef Rizka, who has a doctorate in Arabic and is a literary critic; Maryam Saleh, Minister for Women's Affairs, with a PhD in *shari'a* jurisprudence; Justice Minister Ahmed Khaldi, who is considered one of the best experts in legal disciplines, as confirmed by his position as head of the committee charged with drawing up a Palestinian constitution, and by his position as Dean of Al-Najah University School of Law; the Minister for Agriculture Muhammad al-Agha, who gained a doctorate in environmental studies and hydrology from Manchester and was visiting professor at the University of Virginia in the United States, in Manchester and in Bremen, Germany. There are also those who refer to themselves as independent, such as Nasser al-Din al-Sha'er. Two and a half years later, in the autumn of 2008, Sha'er would call his presence in that government "a service rendered to our people". The very same phrase is used by another West Bank minister, Muhammad Barghouthi, Labor Minister, who adds that he would have felt "more at ease in the national unity government" formed in March 2007 given his position as an independent.²³⁶ Al-Sha'er is one of the best-known intellectuals in Nablus, who gained a doctorate in comparative religion from the University of Manchester, and who for years was the Dean of the Faculty of Law and Islamic Studies in al-Najah. He had always described himself as moderate Islamist along the same lines as Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and had challenged the fact that many experts, scholars and journalists identified him as Hamas' point man in the West Bank – part of a *Nomenklatura* which remains secret – based on the fact that he became Deputy Prime Minister in Haniyeh's first government. He maintains that he was forced to take on that role because Israel had restricted the freedom of movement of the Palestinian leadership in Gaza, effectively halving the real control the Prime Minister had over his government. In his words: "Something had to be done".

The government Hamas must form single-handedly thus locates itself squarely in the tradition of the national movements born from local branches of Hassan al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood, which have always found fertile territory in the liberal professions for activists who would later become leaders. The striking number of scholars, professors, and of those with more than one degree in Haniyeh's government, however, is neither successful nor appealing with the international community, much less with the Israelis. Degrees, doctorates, and academic titles do not help Hamas much in the arduous task of gaining acceptance for a government without allies, and particularly without Fatah. The Professors, in other words – Haniyeh first and foremost among them – have donned a double-breasted suit, but they made no concessions to Israel, and they had

²³⁶ Author's interview with Muhammad Barghouthi, Kobar (Ramallah), February 26th, 2008, and with Nasser al-Din al-Sha'er, Nablus, November 2nd, 2008.

maintained their rejection of the three conditions which the Quartet had set in order to avoid a political and economic crisis in relations with the PNA, including the refusal to formally recognize the State of Israel. It is in the context of these two only partly contradictory elements that the story of Hamas' leadership of the PNA executive branch unfolds: the readiness to dialogue, coupled with inflexibility on the fundamentals. Ultimately, Hamas did not want preconditions because it was those preconditions – at least according to the interpretation the Islamist movement had always given of the Oslo process and of Arafat's conduct – which had from the very beginning destined to failure any possibility of real negotiations: too many concessions by the Palestinian side, with nothing but delays to show for them. At the same time, Hamas did not want to spook the West, and above all the Islamist movement wished to avoid a situation in which Western governments would coalesce around Israel's refusal to negotiate with it.

In order to break the increasing isolation and the image Hamas had gained over the course of the last twelve years, ever since the suicide bombings had begun inside Israeli cities, the Islamist movement undertakes – at least as far as it is possible within its means – a media offensive aimed at showing the world a different face to the Hamas movement. No longer the face of attacks on Tel Aviv buses or in Jerusalem's cafes, but rather the face of those who have committed themselves to the parliamentary route to trace a possible path to peace, albeit within different parameters to Oslo's. The task of painting a new political picture of the Palestinian Islamist movement is left to the leaders who have greater access to Western media. This is what Khaled Meshaal and Moussa Abu Marzouq – the two highest-ranking members of the movement's leadership abroad – do when on January 31st interviews are published simultaneously on the progressive British newspaper *The Guardian* and on America's authoritative *Washington Post*. The differences, to be sure, are more than simple nuances: Meshaal is more concerned with reassuring the constituency of the millions of refugees who fled in 1948, while Abu Marzouq seeks an opening amongst American liberals when he asks the United States to “abandon its position of isolation and join the rest of the world in calling for an end to the occupation, assuring the Palestinians their right to self-determination”.²³⁷

Having said this, it is not so much the Damascus leadership but rather Hamas inside the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and the pragmatists in particular, who formulate the clearest description of the ‘New Hamas’ with regard to Israel, to the West Bank and Gaza, and to Palestine. In this case it is precisely Ismail Haniyeh, the moderate leader within the Strip, who delivers the message, this time not from the generalist platform of a large broadsheet, but to the experts of the International Crisis Group – the European think tank which has published the most in-depth and reliable analysis on the Palestinian situation between 2004 and 2009 – before he even becomes Prime Minister. According to Haniyeh “The real problem is that we are not a state but the government of an authority existing in territory that does not meet the criteria of a state. I say clearly that if Israel wants to end this situation it must agree to a fully sovereign Palestinian state. If this does not happen the conflict will continue”. Abul Abed goes further, and reaches the crux of the matter: “The real problem is that we are not a state but the government of an authority existing in territory that does not meet the criteria of a state. I say clearly that if Israel wants to end this situation it must agree to a fully sovereign Palestinian state. If this does not happen the conflict will continue.” Abul Abed goes further, and reaches the crux

²³⁷ Moussa Abu Marzouq, “What Hamas is Seeking”, in *Washington Post*, January 31st, 2006.

of the matter: “The solution is a sovereign Palestinian state encompassing the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with its capital in East Jerusalem. This does not obligate me to recognise Israel. The reality is that Israel exists and is a state recognised by many, and I have to deal with this. There is no law compelling me to recognise it; the subject of recognition is not on the agenda. The solution is in the hands of the Israelis. We demand that it announce its commitment to a Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem, and clearly announce and fully respect a schedule for implementing this. We are under no obligation to offer initiatives and we do not provide political positions free of charge”.²³⁸

Hamas’ is a game played on a razor’s edge, a game in which the Islamist movement pulls on a rope without thinking it might break at any moment, a game played without allowing flexibility to be mistaken for a breach in its defenses which the opposition might exploit. This is a game that also clashes with Tel Aviv’s absolute inflexibility in the run-up to the Israeli elections scheduled for March 28th. If Hamas continues to call for the liberation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory – albeit signaling several times that it means those within the borders of 1949 armistice – most Israeli politicians continue to regard an agreement with the PNA as impossible, while they view the continuation of unilateralism as extremely realistic. During one of the most delicate periods of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Hamas’ single-party government guided by one of shaykh Ahmed Yassin’s s is installed on March 29th, the day after the Israeli elections which confirm the victory of Kadima – the centrist party established by Sharon – as well as the powerful inroads made by the racist right epitomized by Avigdor Lieberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu, which draws its support primarily from those who emigrated from the former USSR. After Kadima’s (partial) success, would-be Prime Minister Ehud Olmert re-states his promise: if it is not possible to reach an agreement with the Palestinians on a possible peace, Israel will continue its unilateral policy of “disengagement” from certain areas of the West Bank. The United States under George W. Bush follow Israel’s script, and from 6pm on March 29th – the very moment Ismail Haniyeh’s executive is sworn in – they forbid its representatives from having any contact with the Hamas government. An uncompromising confrontation becomes inevitable, and for Hamas this means the progressive and near-complete economic blockade of the PNA. A blockade which Gaza above all others will suffer the consequences of.

Indeed, even before the Hamas government receives its approval from the Parliament, the Strip’s economic isolation is already a reality. From March 11th, 2006, Israel closes the Erez crossing completely to Gazan laborers. In March it also begins the ‘flour crisis’, the food crisis due to Israel’s closure of the Karni commercial crossing into the Strip. UNRWA sounds the alarm, because after a week of continuous closure it is not just Gaza’s bakeries which have had to close, but even the reserves held by the UN agency charged to provide aid to Palestinian refugees have reached a bare minimum. It falls to the government in charge before the swearing in of Hamas’ single-party executive – the administration lead by Fatah’s eldest leader Ahmed Qureya – to stigmatize the fact, speaking out against the fact that Karni has been closed for forty-eight days in the previous two months. Aside from being Abu Ala government’s Minister of Economy, Mazen Sinnokrot is a businessman in the West Bank well-known for his wafer biscuits as well as for his moderate Islamist stance. He lays the blame for the humanitarian disaster

²³⁸ International Crisis Group, “Palestinians, Israel and the Quartet: Pulling Back from the Brink”, op. cit., p. 3.

squarely on Israel's decision to close the border crossing for 'security reasons', opening it only occasionally, by fits and starts. But it's up to the former government of Ahmed Qureya, one of Fatah's elders, to stigmatize the fact, speaking out against the fact that Karni has been closed for forty-eight days over the past two months. This decision to keep Karni closed leaves Palestinian agricultural produce ready for export rotting in trucks, including produce from the former settlers' greenhouses which James Wolfensohn (former Head of the World Bank and Quartet Special Envoy for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza) had strenuously struggled to leave to Palestinians after the withdrawal. Palestinian leaders all reach the conclusion that Israel is using Karni for political reasons, to put pressure on the PNA, not just on Hamas. In the case of this particular crisis, the situation would be resolved – albeit only partially – thanks to a negotiation carried out at the residence of the American ambassador in Israel involving Israelis, Egyptians and Palestinians which would allow a dozen trucks loaded with flour to pass through Karni in order to re-supply Gaza's bakeries, which had shut down for lack of ingredients. This episode, however, is significant because it epitomizes the way in which border crossings with Gaza would work over the coming years, only to be completely sealed off after Hamas' 'coup' in June 2007. The border would be opened or closed depending on a several different variables: first and foremost, the Qassam rockets fired towards Sderot and on other towns in the Negev – rockets which would be fired from time to time by several different armed groups within the Strip. In addition to this, there were security procedures according to which borders would be closed on Jewish holidays, for example.

Thus, the humanitarian emergency in Gaza, Hamas' stronghold, develops in parallel with the transition from the old Palestinian Authority which has been in power for the past twelve years, and the new Authority which sees the Islamic Resistance Movement making inroads into the nerve centers of Palestinian public life. Yet little seems to change for Hamas compared to the long phase during which it adopted terrorism as a tool of political struggle: the diplomatic isolation, the political pressure, and now also the economic blockade which strikes not just the movement but Palestinian society as a whole are a constant throughout the uphill struggle that marks the history of the first Hamas-only government. However, to lay responsibility for this history purely at Israel's door or the international community's would be too simplistic. While the path of the Hamas government is certainly uphill, it is also not too different from previous chapters in the Islamist movement's history, chapters marked by violent opposition, by occupation, and by a political discourse which fails (or is unwilling) to move beyond the adversarial dimension of Palestinian history. The most important question is the root of Hamas' inability to display a certain flexibility faced with the demands made by the international community. One possible answer is internal. All of a sudden, without any sort of transitional phase, Hamas went from being an opposition movement to having to govern the territory administered by the Palestinian National Authority – an institution of which it had never wished to be a part. It would be impossible for such a sudden change not to have a major impact both on Hamas' ideology and on its politics. But Hamas' reaction remained anchored to its pre-existing political and organizational structure, which represented the main 'obstacle' to the possibility of responding swiftly to external demands. Hamas' 'democratic centralism', the very decision-making process it goes through by way of its internal debate and consultation of its four *constituencies*, are responsible for the sluggish pace at which Hamas reacted and reacts still today. Its

responses – made purely by means of statements made by those leaders which have the highest media profile – result in statements in which the Islamist movement is unable to go beyond ambiguity. Having said that, what comes across as ambiguity from the outside also means steadfastness, the very steadfastness which voters had rewarded by simultaneously punishing Fatah’s flexibility.

The first few months of the Haniyeh government were extremely difficult: funds are scarce, and the Palestinian Authority’s deficit increases from month to month after Israel’s freeze on handing over remittances. The European Union is at a loss for how to react: it does not wish to interrupt aid to the general population, but at the same time it does not want to have to go through a Hamas government. In June, it would find a way of resolving the dilemma by means of a Temporary International Mechanism (TIM) which would allow at least a part of PNA salaries to get through to employees, for a total of around one hundred and forty million dollars. The United Nations encounters greater procedural difficulties: they maintain relations with Ministries, while avoiding contact with Ministers of the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya* themselves as much as possible. Their interaction, therefore, becomes entirely bureaucratic. The government attempts to parry this blow: it moves into the ministries, but it must also enter into the organizational machinery without any help from its predecessors, and it must most of all resolve immediate problems such as the payment of public employees’ salaries in arrears, a real Sword of Damocles hanging over the government’s head. Teachers, for example, who represent a third of the salary bill to be paid and some of which – as Nasser al-Din al-Sha’er, himself a teacher, says – “haven’t been paid for nine months; it’s an accumulated problem. There’s not a single dollar left in the ministry. The private sector is suffering too. We can do nothing without aid. People are already suffering. We don’t know how long they’ll be patient”.²³⁹ Hamas’ leaders attempt to convince its counterparts that the guillotine that was the lack of monies would strike all Palestinians, without regard for political parties. Salah al-Bardawil, Hamas’ parliamentary spokesperson, uses his own case as an example: towards the end of November 2006, nearly one year after the resignation presented in his previous job in order to run in the general election, he had once received half of his deputy’s salary, and two downpayments amounting to three hundred and four hundred dollars respectively.²⁴⁰ The government tries to provide some respite for its employees by handing out downpayments on salaries when it can, but this is ultimately useless: the strikes, particularly concentrated among public sector employees where Fatah’s presence is very strong, are a constant thorn in the Hamas’ government side throughout the year it remains in office. Among Islamists, it is argued that the strikes are politically motivated, but the result doesn’t change: because of the lack of funds, the population is on its knees.

These insurmountable problems the Hamas leadership attempts to take on in various different ways. If on the one hand it attempts to open a breach in the barrier which has gone up in the West, on the other it seeks support elsewhere. Iran’s is a foregone conclusion, but it is not enough, especially from a political point of view. The goal is to win the support of their Arab brethren, but the Arab League is increasingly divided. There is the moderate front, which includes the pillars of US Middle East policy

²³⁹ Wendy Kristianasen, “Palestine: Hamas besieged”, op. cit.

²⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, “After Mecca: Engaging Hamas”, *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 62, February 28th, 2007, p. 6.

lead by Egypt and Jordan. Then there are the Gulf countries which feel increasingly uneasy because of the growing tension all around Iraq and Iran; and finally countries like Syria, which during this phase is increasingly pressed towards the 'Axis of Evil' drawn up in Washington. To obtain the support of an organization like the Arab League, increasingly fragmented as it is and unable to either formulate a vision for a Palestinian future or mediate effectively between Abu Mazen and Hamas, is practically impossible, and at any rate does not go beyond promises of massive financial help. Of the tens of millions of dollars that had been promised, however, not much would actually make it into the Palestinian Territory. Moreover, Hamas is unable to itself distinguish between its role as a movement and its role as a government, between political leaders and members of the Palestinian executive. Khaled Meshaal, for example, immediately attempts to position himself as one of Hamas' most authoritative leaders by setting out on a tour of those capitals willing to extend their welcome. Meshaal's is a role that if on the one hand helps Hamas overcome its isolation, on the other diminishes the role of the Hamas-lead government itself. And yet, going on the few statements made in this regard by the Hamas leadership, and keeping in mind that the movement itself has never been easy to decipher because even after entering the PNA institutions it never shed its veil of secrecy, from the point of view of its internal organization, there is no ambiguity. Or at least in theory there should be none. Khalil al-Hayyah is one of the best-known public figures in Gaza, and he explains that taking on an important position in the government automatically means losing one's role in the movement's decision-making bodies. Hayyah points out that "They remain members of Hamas and contribute to its internal discussions, but you can't, for example, be a PA minister and at the same time remain a member of the Consultative Council [*majlis shura*] or Politburo [*maktab siyasi*]." ²⁴¹

If this is true from the standpoint of internal organization, the image which is perceived by public opinion and by other governments is that Meshaal is taking on a number of roles at the same time: leader of the movement, ambassador for a government whose members find it hard to leave Gaza and the West Bank, he is also the person who defines policies, which governments register and to which they react. His Palestinian critics argue that his main objective was to become a kind of new, Islamist Arafat. Be it as it may, it is Meshaal who succeeds in breaking the Palestinian government's isolation by going to Ankara in his first meeting with a foreign state of note – Turkey – which would be in an ideal position to take on the mantle of facilitator for negotiations. Turkey is a NATO member, and has also in recent years mitigated tensions with its neighbor, Syria, which plays host to the Hamas leadership abroad while also remaining the only state in the region which can claim to be a traditional friend of Israel, as well as readying – albeit with some difficulties – to join the European Union. Finally, Ankara's is also the first government in the Near East to have chosen the path of moderate Islamism as represented by the AK Party lead by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It is not a coincidence, then, that Meshaal asked Ankara's leaders for a meeting, nor that the Turkish government was very careful in its handling of that visit in mid-February 2006: yes to a meeting with the then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, no to a one-to-one meeting with Prime Minister Erdogan. For Khaled Meshaal, the Turkish leg of his tour is in any case already a media success. Even more important would be his meeting in Russia, a meeting offered no less than by one of the Quartet states, who wishes to raise its profile

²⁴¹ Ibid. p. 25.

in the Middle East once more. Vladimir Putin wants to count, and decides to meet Hamas not least because from a formal point of view, he is the only one who can. The United States included Hamas in its black list of terrorist organizations, with the European Union eventually following suit, not least thanks to the encouragement of the Italian government lead by Silvio Berlusconi, during Italy's six-month presidency of the EU in 2003. Moscow, on the other hand, is bound by no such commitments, and Meshaal can in this way break international ostracism to launch his offer to Israel from the Neretva stage. Hamas' political bureau abroad says: "If Israel declares that it is ready and shows commitment to withdraw from the lands occupied in 1967, if it guarantees the return of refugees, dismantles the colonies, and demolishes the separation wall and releases prisoners, our movement will take steps towards peace".²⁴² This offer, however, is not followed by any opening whatsoever, either by Israel or by the Quartet. For the international community, recognizing Israel cannot be put on the table with half-hearted commitments: recognition is either full or it is nothing. This position, however, makes no concessions to the first law of diplomacy, namely negotiation. On the other hand, Hamas is unable to move beyond a position of principle, a position consolidated by too many failures in various peace processes over the years – not least the terrorist phase which ensured the failure of any steps forward, and which was used to provide with alibis to establish 'facts on the ground'.

Hamas, however, is not a monolith, not least from the post of the political dispositions it contains within it. If Haniyeh is its moderate face, if Meshaal is the leader who in time is making concessions to pragmatism, there still remains a more radical wing which is not limited to the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing which – echoing that between Sinn Fein and the IRA, for example – considers itself independent in certain respects. Whether they are called Said Siyyam or – to a lesser extent – Mahmoud A-Zahhar, there are hawks within the strictly speaking political movement as well. Moreover, the more conservative wing, the one most closely linked to the 'resistance' phase and less closely associated with the 'political' phase, does not make the job of ferrying Hamas towards moderation any easier. On the contrary, the conservative wing undertakes actions which would only deepen the divide between Hamas and Fatah. These are actions mostly centered on the question of security and of the balance of power between different armed groups, reflecting a mindset in approaching relations with Fatah which is clearly born of the changes brought by the Second Intifada. Those decisions diminish the possible role, the power and the margins for action for Hamas' moderate wing. They also entrench the international community's position, albeit an international community which had already decided that it would not support Hamas' 'doves' by gesturing towards openings which would, on the contrary, only have consolidated the Islamist movement's negotiating power.

²⁴² *Ria Novosti*, March 3rd, 2006.

Chapter 7: Hamas versus Fatah

Prison diplomacy

The clash over the question of recognizing Israel transcends borders and in particular it goes beyond the streets of Palestine, where the truly pressing problems are others: salaries, of course, but especially violence among armed factions. It is above all the Gaza Strip that pays the price for a tension which has by now become a staple of everyday life as the factions commit to one side or the other of the duopoly which has come to dominate the Palestinian National Authority leadership. Weapons appear on the streets. Shots are fired in broad daylight, people shot in the legs, the opponent's militants are kidnapped for a few hours, warnings are issued: Gaza becomes a land where the population's safety – even children going to school – is no longer put at risk by Israeli soldiers, but by the Palestinian militants. It's Hamas versus Fatah, and the clashes get worse by the day. The armed groups linked to the two main Palestinian factions become the real protagonists of the confrontation, both as instruments of political conflict, and as pressure groups – so to speak – which in turn exert pressure on their own leaderships. Hamas' and Fatah's armed wings enter the fray, and friction reaches all the way into the security institutions, which in the spring of 2006 are still in the process of being reformed. In April, Abbas reinforces the Presidential Guard and makes it answerable directly to him, and also establishes an organization tasked with monitoring borders, therefore in practice of the crossing between Gaza and Egypt at Rafah. Hamas responds by establishing the Security Forces Unit, a body which takes its orders from the Haniyeh government's Interior Ministry, thereby challenging Abu Mazen's authority. Heading what would later be called the Executive Force²⁴³ – indeed, many say it was he himself who pressed for its establishment – is Said Siyyam, well-known as one of the movement's hawks, one of the men who has contacts not just with Hamas' military wing, but with other armed factions within the Strip.

The Executive Force brings together groups which had been established and later consolidated during the Second Intifada, indeed in some senses this incorporation 'regiments' them. Thus, it is not just Hamas' militants in the so-called *tanfisiyya* who become members, but more importantly it is the members of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) which join the Executive Force. The PRC is itself heterogeneous, and not integrated into the Islamist movement. In a move which appears to be aimed at strengthening links with the Popular Resistance Committees, Siyyam appoints as Director General of his Ministry the founder of the PRC, Jamal Abu Samhadhana, who is also number two at the top of Israel's most wanted list. Abu Samhadhana's appointment, therefore, is yet another spark over a very dry pyre, one which cannot but seriously embarrass Abbas, who sure enough immediately – albeit unsuccessfully – attempts to block it. The Executive Force comprises three thousand men who within a few months

²⁴³ Roland Friedrich and Arnold Luethold (eds.) *Entry-Points to Palestinian Security Sector Reform*, Dcaf: Geneva 2007, p. 22.

practically double. The perception is that the Force has been established for two reasons: to reinforce and ‘regularize’ the military tools at Hamas’ disposal in the Gaza Strip, and to establish an organization sufficiently strong that it would be in a position to confront the Preventive Security Force – which had traditionally been close to Dahlan – head-on. The sheer numbers are still relatively small, compared to the sixty thousand-strong Presidential forces. The three thousand men initially incorporated under Siyyam’s *tanfisiyya*, however, give Fatah more than a little to ponder, not merely because of their training and their cohesion as a force, nor even because of their religious zeal, but because they herald a confrontation which can be expected to be bloody, given what has already happened in the Strip.

In a surprise move, however, this cycle of violence is broken on May 11th by the prisoners held in Israeli jails, the only group within Palestinian society which had a sufficiently high moral standing to bring everyone – both Hamas and Fatah – together to the negotiating table. If in mid-2006 national dialog is re-started, it is because a document drawn up by the prisoners and signed by the most important leaders of each movement emerges from the Hadarim penitentiary in central Israel. The document contains few novelties compared to what has been said a few weeks earlier by Hamas leaders in the West Bank and in Gaza, who had attempted to reconcile ambiguity and flexibility with statements which differed merely in their tone. The document is blunt. Palestine is the land within the 1967 borders, including West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Refugees have the ‘right of return’. Hamas and Islamic Jihad must become PLO members. Internal Palestinian divisions and armed confrontation between factions must cease. And there must be a relationship of reciprocal respect and trust between the PNA Presidency (Abbas) and the Prime Minister’s office (Haniyeh). Thus, the document attempts to bring together essentially internal matters such as the clash between factions, with the need to break the Palestinian Authority’s increasing isolation. This international isolation forces Palestinian prisoners to dedicate the first of the eighteen points of this document, entitled ‘Document for National Reconciliation’ precisely to the question of the geographical boundaries of Palestine. The first point states: “the Palestinian people in the homeland and in the Diaspora seek to liberate their land and to achieve their right in freedom, return and independence and to exercise their right in self determination, including the right to establish their independent state with al-Quds al-Sharif [Jerusalem] as its capital on all territories occupied in 1967 and to secure the right of return for the refugees and to liberate all prisoners and detainees based on the historical right of our people on the land of the fathers and grandfathers and based on the UN Charter and the international law and international legitimacy”. In this sense, the text is a perfect example of a balancing act. The recognition of Israel is as implicit as it was in the statements made previously by the Hamas leadership. The tool is the recognition of the PLO as “the legitimate and sole representative of the Palestinian people wherever they are located”: the PLO itself recognizes Israel in its own charter, and the document states that Hamas and Islamic Jihad must become members of the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine itself. Equally, the document makes implicit statements when it refers to its support for “the right of the Palestinian people in resistance, [...] focusing the resistance in the occupied territories of 1967”.

The way the document has been phrased speaks volumes about the extent to which every word has been carefully weighed in the internal debate among prisoners so

that there might be a *de facto* recognition of Israel, while not discarding either references to historical Palestine (“land of their fathers and grandfathers”) or refugees’ right of return. The terms used have been drip-fed into the document after a slow debate involving all the prisons and all the factions represented there. In fact, the idea of a national platform which might overcome the divisions between factions had been floated at least since Arafat’s death, in late 2004. In this sense, the prisoners’ document was not a bolt out of the blue, nor an agreement imposed from above. First-hand accounts²⁴⁴ state that a draft document, hand-written on large yellow sheets of paper had been circulating in the Be’er Sheva jail already in January 2005. The person who shows the document is one of those whose signature appears on the Document for National Reconciliation: Muhammad Jamal al-Natsche, another member of Hebron’s great Natsche clan. Elected in 2006 amongst the deputies in the Change and Reform list, Muhammad Jamal al-Natsche was one of the Hamas leaders who was taking part in the national dialog between Palestinian factions. Those sheets of paper poured over in a cell in the Be’er Sheva prison a year and a half before the publication of the “prisoners’ document” provide an indication of just how much this political self-analysis came as a direct result not of the January 2006 elections, but rather of the generational change brought about by the Second Intifada.

This analysis, moreover, was supported from outside the prisons by those among the Hamas factions’ leaderships who had themselves formerly been detained and who at that point found themselves at the center of the political action in Ramallah or in Gaza City. From this point of view, it is no coincidence that the first signatory of the “prisoners’ document” was Marwan Barghouthi, who was not only Fatah’s most famous and most popular leader in Palestine, but also the only one amongst Fatah’s leadership whom all factions would listen to, Hamas included. Well before the Islamist movement’s electoral victory, Barghouthi had given a memorable interview to *Al-Jazeera* in which he argued that there would be only one possibility for the future PNA government: national unity. The national unity Marwan Barghouthi referred to was the unity amongst ‘blood brothers’, those who had been brought together by their “resistance to the Israeli occupation”. In making this claim, Barghouthi placed the prisoners at the heart of Palestinian politics. Although at the time this might have appeared merely as an attempt to stop the prisoners from being forgotten by those who were then in charge of public life, it would later become clear that it was a prelude of things to come. If a dialog between Hamas and Fatah were to be possible at such a delicate stage in Palestinian politics, it would be only through the prisons.

Reaching an understanding behind bars was not a problem for the two factions. The other high-profile signatory of the prisoners’ document was shaykh Abdel Khaleq al-Natsche, Hamas’ highest-ranking prisoner.²⁴⁵ Such an agreement should not come as a surprise precisely because national dialog between factions was a practice which had been going on for a long time, at least amongst prisoners, where jails themselves would

²⁴⁴ Author’s visit to the Be’er Sheva prison and meeting with activists from Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, January 12th, 2005. For Hamas, Muhammad Jamal al-Natsche himself was present. Israeli authorities would later transfer him to the Ketziot prison.

²⁴⁵ Abdel Khaleq al-Natsche would later temporarily withdraw his signature of the document when the clash between Haniyeh and Abbas over the possibility of a referendum would become more strident, in June 2006.

often be organized based on the separation between prisoners according to their political affiliation: all those belonging to Islamic Jihad would be held together, just as Fatah, PFLP and Hamas members would be held with their own. However, prisons were also place in which the forced proximity of detention and the shared nature of their punishments provided a common ground from which a conversation might begin not least thanks to the neutral ‘terrain’ of the often long detention sentences handed down to many of the detained activists. If anything, the problem lay with those outside the prison walls and at the highest levels of those very same factions whose imprisoned members, from inside their cells, had reached an agreement while their counterparts continued confront each other, especially on the streets of the Strip. The problem for the leaderships in Ramallah and in Gaza City is rather how *not* to take into account – even diminish its importance, if they can – that document written by those prisoners who in the eyes of Palestinian society are the living definition of suffering and of heroism. In the ongoing debate, that document cannot simply be ignored. Barely two weeks after the public distribution of the document, on May 25th, Mahmoud Abbas therefore finds it easy to launch his proposal of putting the prisoners’ document to a referendum. The PNA President does this at the very beginning of the conference on national dialog because he wants to break the impasse which Hamas above all has contributed to bringing about: until that point, Hamas had delayed giving its public approval to the document in order to allow for its internal debate to take its course. Although he emphasized that his was not an ultimatum, Abu Mazen’s proposal looks a lot like one, particularly because of the time limits he places on the discussion: only ten days’ time to agree on a program of national unity, without which a referendum should be called within forty days. A referendum with a single question: the approval of the prisoners’ document.

Mahmoud Abbas is counting on two elements: first, because the document might not simply be important, but even decisive in attempting to overcome international isolation, as it contains a *de facto* recognition of Israel. Secondly, because from the point of view of internal Palestinian politics, the document pushes Hamas into a corner, since it cannot reject it, but neither can it accept it entirely without first consulting all of its *constituencies*.²⁴⁶ Ismail Haniyeh’s answer, delivered during the sermon for Friday prayers, the day after Abu Mazen’s proposal, is one directed at the second element mentioned above, implied in the request that the document should be submitted to a popular vote. Before the gathered faithful, allowing himself to take on the tones of a tribune, the Palestinian Prime Minister issues a warning: “Even if they besiege us from every side, they should not even dream that we will make political concessions”. He does not, however, name either the assailants or what the concessions in question might be. The ‘imprecision’ is not a coincidence, because it is that very same ambiguity which will give Haniyeh some room for maneuver in the negotiations which *de facto* have already begun. Haniyeh makes a move of his own through his interior Minister Said Siyyam, whose street reputation was as one of Hamas’ toughest in Gaza. While Haniyeh is pronouncing his words of warning directed at Abu Mazen, he is also launching his own proposal, a proposal which is perhaps less eye-catching, but which is certainly more concrete. Said Siyyam orders his men in the Support Force – a force formally established on May 17th against the PNA Presidency’s will – to leave the streets of the Gaza Strip and confine themselves to the group’s headquarters. The intention is obvious, namely to

²⁴⁶ Alvaro De Soto, *End of Mission Report – Confidential*, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

reduce the friction with the security forces linked to the PNA Presidency, and to send Fatah a sign of peace after a hard, bloody week which left at least a dozen dead between the two factions. Besides, the referendum might help Hamas overcome the difficulties in its position in relation to its recognition of Israel, as it would be able to appeal to the will of the people. Moreover, a referendum might provide an opening for Hamas to be able to accept the Saudi plan proposed by the then Regent Abdullah during the Arab League summit held in Beirut in the spring of 2002: an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders in exchange for security and peace with the whole of the Muslim and Arab world. In reality, however, Haniyeh's message does not have the desired effect: although as happens often in the Arab world negotiations continued, by the beginning of June, the struggle between the Palestinian Presidency and the Government had nearly reached boiling point.

Without any doubt, the prisoners document breaks the vicious cycle which had begun just after the elections, the Quartet's ultimatum, and the only nominally centrist and neutral position taken by Abu Mazen. Abdel Khaleq al-Natsche's signature at the foot of those eighteen points, however, shatters the four-dimensional image Hamas has given itself until that point. There has to date been no confirmation by the protagonists themselves, but it may be hypothesized that the Islamist leaders within Israeli jails attempted to put pressure on the Hamas leadership both within the Palestinian Occupied Territory and abroad, pushing them to adopt a less ambiguous position not so much on the question of recognizing Israel, as much as on the delimitation of Palestine within the 1949 armistice borders. An indirect confirmation of this hypothesis can be drawn from the silence with which the document was met by the *Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*'s leadership in the West Bank, in Gaza and in Damascus. Had shaykh al-Natsche's position been the result of Hamas' normal decision-making process, with the four constituencies voting and a decision being taken on a majority basis, the response from the leadership abroad to the document's publication would have been immediate, without uncertainties or embarrassment. However, in reality nearly two months are necessary before Hamas is ready to accept the document to the point of making it the basis of the agreement between Haniyeh and Abu Mazen, and Haniyeh's signature comes only after certain changes which give some sense of the tough internal debate which has taken place in the meantime. Ultimately, as Mustapha Barghouthi among others argues, the moderate wing wins out over the resistance by the leadership abroad.²⁴⁷

As expected, it is the very first article which undergoes changes, not with regard to defining Palestine along the 1949 armistice lines as the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, but rather on two even more controversial points: the presence of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and the fate of the refugees from 1948 and 1967. As far as the peace process as defined by the *road map* and George W. Bush's position clearly expressed in spring 2005 are concerned, the Palestinian right to "remove the settlements and evacuate the settlers and remove the apartheid and annexation and separation wall" and the question of "annexation and separation" mean an implicit halt to negotiations involving territorial exchanges or concessions of any kind concerning the Green Line. During a meeting with Ariel Sharon the previous year, Bush had clearly modified the US positions, declaring that he was ready to recognize that the 1967 line was no longer realistic after the 'facts on the ground' which Israel itself had created with its large West Bank settlements. The prisoners' document, as it was modified and then approved on

²⁴⁷ Author's interview with Mustapha Barghouthi, Ramallah, August 16th, 2007.

June 28th, 2006, puts the breaks on the prospects for a compromise on borders, just as it hardens its positions on the question of refugees, by adding a proviso which would make any negotiation far more difficult. According to the modified version, the refugees have the right to return to “their homes and properties from which they were evicted and to compensate them”.²⁴⁸

That fistful of words added to the document are not inconsequential, nor do they split hairs: on the contrary, they have considerable consequences for Palestinians’ flexibility in any possible negotiation with the Israelis, bringing the focus squarely back on the Green Line, and demonstrates just how much the Islamist leadership both in Gaza and in Damascus – both extremely sensitive to the question of refugees, not least personally – wished to leave their mark on the document. Thus, Hamas appears to regain unity after an internal consultation process, after which the PNA Presidency and Haniyeh’s government appear to be sending each other positive signals. It does not appear to be a chance, for example, that under the watchful eye of the Presidential Guard loyal to Abu Mazen Foreign Minister Mahmoud A-Zahhar is allowed to pass through the Rafah crossing with suitcases containing twenty million dollars, just as Abbas and Haniyeh are engaged in negotiations over the prisoners’ document. Abu Mazen responds to critics by saying that the money will go straight into the Treasury’s coffers, and therefore not into Hamas’. This monied crossing will be repeated shortly thereafter with Information Minister Youssef Rizka, who carries two million dollars across the same border crossing into Gaza, thereby circumventing the increasing isolation which by that point had made it impossible to even receive funding from Arab countries, through foreign banks.

The agreement struck between Hamas and Fatah over the prisoners’ document is reached, but it’s too late. The agreement is undermined by the ambush which a number of militia men carry out at dawn on the 25th of June. It is a Sunday, just beyond the Kerem Shalom crossing, and the attack takes a heavy toll for Israel: two soldiers killed and the kidnapping of the young Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit. After twelve years of quiet as far as kidnappings of Israeli soldiers were concerned, this sudden return drops like a rock not just on internal Palestinian politics, but also on the attempt to build a new relationship between a PNA in which Fatah no longer has a monopoly on power, and the community of Western states. Three groups claim responsibility for the kidnapping: part of the Hamas military wing, the Popular Resistance Committees, and a new group calling itself the Army of Islam. In their claim, they put forward two reasons for their actions: first, the Israeli incursion on Rafah carried out on June 24th – the first since Sharon’s unilateral disengagement – which left two Hamas fighters dead; and secondly, the targeted assassination carried out on the 8th of June against Jamal Abu Samhadhana, the leader of the Executive Force. It is said that the tunnel which had been dug to reach the other side had been completed for months, meaning that the operation had been planned far in advance. And yet, the attack also seemed to be designed by at least a part of Hamas’ military wing so as to undermine any possibility of an agreement between Haniyeh and Abbas, thereby affecting political decisions. It is, however, virtually impossible to establish whether that act carried out by a part of the military wing had in fact been

²⁴⁸ *National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners*, June 28th, 2006, text accessible at UNISPAL - United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/7CCBF1FC97FE8BB98525719B005EFCF2>

ordered from within the political establishment. Ever since the Hamas reorganization in Gaza carried out by Moussa Abu Marzouq, the military wing is independent from its political counterpart, at least from an operational point of view: this decision had been taken after the arrests at the end of the Eighties which had decimated the Movement's cadres – not least owing to the information furnished by collaborators – seriously weakening the Islamist movement. The independence of the movement's two wings had therefore been considered vital in order to avoid the possibility that Israeli repression might track the organization and destroy it.

Israel's military reaction to Gilad Shalit's kidnapping is not far off. Early on, military operations are limited – so to speak – to the entry of tanks into the old airport at Dahanya, near the Israeli border, and to some raids targeting infrastructure. Three bridges and the even more important power station on which half of Gaza's population depends are destroyed, leaving seven hundred thousand people without electricity, not to mention many without power for the pumps through which their water supply is carried. Israel decides to raise the stakes by targeting the Hamas leadership: on July 2nd, it bombs and destroys Ismail Haniyeh's offices, although he himself was elsewhere at the time. Three days earlier, in a move intended to put pressure on those who had kidnapped Gilad Shalit, the Israeli authorities arrest and imprison sixty-four people, among the most prominent Hamas leaders in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem: it is only the first in a number of raids which results in the arrest of eight Ministers, twenty-six members of the Palestinian parliament, and leaders of the Islamist movement's base. The first wave of arrests, carried out at dawn on June 29th, apprehends Chancellor Omar Abdel Razeq, his colleague at Planning Samir Abu Eiseh, the Minister for Decentralization Issa al-Jabari, the Minister for Prisoners Wasfi Kabaha, the Minister for Social Affairs Fakhri Turkman, the Minister for Jerusalem Affairs Khaled Abu Arafah, the Labor Minister Muhammad Barghouthi and the Minister for Religious Affairs Nayef Rajoub. On August 5th, it's the turn of Aziz Dweik, Speaker for the Legislative Council, whose health is fragile, and on August 19th Deputy Prime Minister Nasser al-Din Sha'er is arrested – the two best-known figures amongst Hamas' moderates in the West Bank, and very well-known in Nablus. The list of arrests continues, and the Minister for Public Works Abdel Rahman Zeidan is arrested on November 3rd.²⁴⁹ Despite all this, however, Israel is unable to get Gilad Shalit back, so the military stranglehold is tightened: one hundred and seventy-eight Palestinians are killed in the space of a month and a half, property destroyed, and a humanitarian emergency which receives ever less attention in the media because in the meantime the Thirty-Three Days' War between Israel and Lebanon has erupted. On July 12th, Hizbullah opens a second front, just after the Israeli attack on Gaza, by kidnapping two Israeli soldiers and killing another eight in two different raids. Tel Aviv responds with a harshness which the Party of God had not expected: over twelve hundred Lebanese killed in little more than a month, with intense bombardments carried out against Beirut and in the southern portions of the Land of Cedars. Hizbullah responds with Katyusha rockets which strike not just in the Galilee area, but reach as far south as Haifa. The conflict is finally halted when an agreement is reached not least thanks to the efforts made by Italian

²⁴⁹ In January 2009, the number of Members of Parliament held in Israeli jails, mostly affiliated to the Change and Reform List, was forty-five, including detainees whose preventive incarceration terms were lengthened despite the fact that they had completed their sentence.

diplomats, who succeed in drawing in Israel's greatest ally, the United States. The spotlight had moved from Gaza to Lebanon, and in September it would again turn South.

In the meantime, something has changed not only within the Haniyeh government, but more generally throughout Palestinian institutions. Dozens of Ministers and Members of Parliament are now in Israeli jails, but the executive has not resigned, as some American strategists had expected. Moreover, the prisoners' document, which had been drawn up over a year and a half of debates remains the basis for the agreement. Once again, President Abbas and Prime Minister Haniyeh meet to try to find an agreement over a government of national unity, although this possibility results in considerable concern by the United States, who at this point are pressing Abu Mazen to dissolve Hamas executive. According to information gathered by David Rose in his now famous investigation published on *Vanity Fair*, it is the Bush Administration's Secretary of State herself who in early October presented Abbas with an ultimatum. In his face-to-face talks with Condoleezza Rice in Ramallah, the PNA President attempts to buy time over an *iftar* meal for the breaking of the Ramadan daily fast, trying to delay the fall of the government until after the Muslim festivities of Ramadan, and then of Eid al-Fitr, the great feast which concludes the holy month of penitence. Abbas' behavior is indicative of the degree to which he cannot be considered an impartial figure inside the Palestinian political and institutional equilibria.

Rose refers that at this point Condoleezza Rice quipped "that damned *iftar* cost us another two weeks of Hamas government".²⁵⁰ This kind of comment is indicative of the hurried nature of American foreign policy in the Middle East at this time, and of its recklessness, and is confirmed by Alvaro De Soto's own impressions. According to the UN representative, at least during this period, Abu Mazen never rejected the strategy of attempting to co-opt Hamas, "The United States, which appear to listen to a small clique of Palestinian interlocutors who tell them what they want to hear, seemed to believe on any number of occasions that Abu Mazen was just around the corner from taking Hamas on", notwithstanding the fact that this misjudged "both the man, and the balance of forces he faced".²⁵¹

It is from this point on, from early fall 2006, that a race against time begins in which different participants are attempting to reach goals which, if they are not wholly contradictory, are certainly very different. On the one hand, Washington was pressing for a resolution to the Palestinian impasse through a 'straightforward' fall of the Haniyeh government and the ejection of Hamas from the corridors of power. The note drafted by the American Consul in Jerusalem Jake Walles under instructions from the State Department leaves no room for doubt: "Hamas should be given a clear choice, with a clear deadline: [...] they either accept a new government that meets the Quartet principles, or they reject it. The consequences of Hamas' decision should also be clear: If Hamas does not agree within the prescribed time, you [Abbas] should make clear your intention to declare a state of emergency and form an emergency government explicitly committed to that platform".²⁵²

In yet another struggle, several governments of European Union member states – particularly those where right-wing executives have been replaced by left-wing ones –

²⁵⁰ David Rose, *The Gaza Bombshell*, op. cit.

²⁵¹ Alvaro De Soto, *End of Mission Report – Confidential*, op. cit., p.22.

²⁵² David Rose, *The Gaza Bombshell*, op. cit.

support the attempts at mediation provided by Mustapha Barghouthi. Barghouthi himself is a well-known name in European intellectual circles, and he also has good connections within governments: he is a secularist, he took part in the First Intifada, and he heads one of the Palestinian NGOs which receives most support from abroad, the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees (UPMRC) which was established in the 1970s. One of the best-known representatives of Palestinian civil society, Barghouthi ran against Abbas in the presidential elections, receiving a considerable level of support, and he also has his own small but independent party. All these characteristics make him an ideal candidate to don the mantle of a mediator without too many obstacles, drawing on the prisoners' document and the broad commitments to a unity government by both Hamas and Fatah. From his office in Ramallah,²⁵³ the headquarters of his NGO, Barghouthi tells his story: My mediation began in early October, a very intense 'shuttle diplomacy' which took place particularly with Khaled Meshaal and Mahmoud Abbas. During that period I also met Condoleezza Rice and a considerable number of EU Foreign Ministers." As he explains, "there were objective elements which were pushing in the direction of an agreement: Hamas was suffering as a consequence of the embargo, because of the impossibility of governing, and because of the strikes. Fatah, on the other hand, had not succeeded in reaching its objective of bringing the government down either through strikes or through the referendum". The peak of Barghouthi's mediation was reached in November 2006, at which point the obstacles appeared to have for the most part been overcome, with positions having drawn sufficiently close to reach an agreement. Meshaal and Abbas sign a document of which Barghouthi possesses the only original. The agreement, however, falls through on November 30th, when Abbas announces that negotiations have reached a dead end, and puts paid to any hope for an agreement.

What had happened? Mustapha Barghouthi asks for a sheet of paper, and begins to draw on a lined notebook. He describes the divisions not just in words, but with a series of lines, tracing fractures, areas within each political group. He draws the wings inside both Fatah and Hamas. At the close of 2006, the Islamist movement, for example, was divided into three groups: doves, pragmatists in the middle, and hawks, demolishing the interpretation widely circulating in the international media, of a movement simply split in 'hawks' and 'doves'. The problem was that at a certain point found themselves agreeing on a position which was making agreement increasingly difficult because it demanded that Haniyeh should stay on as Prime Minister in the new government of national unity. This move had thrown the carefully placed cards of mediation to the wind. On the other hand, pragmatists, that is to say the Hamas leadership abroad, would have had no problem in accepting another name for the post. According to Barghouthi, amongst these pragmatists was Khaled Meshaal himself. Barghouthi's attempt at negotiation was directed primarily at Hamas, at finding a way of getting the pragmatists to come round to the positions already adopted by the Haniyeh's moderates and by other leaders both in Gaza and in the West Bank. As Barghouthi himself said: "the unfair portrayal of Meshaal was pointless. For me, it was important to speak with him".²⁵⁴ Barghouthi believed that Hamas was determined on certain points, such as the post of Prime Minister, but was flexible on other ministerial posts, including the Foreign Ministry and the Treasury: "They wanted to become part of the system, of the Authority"

²⁵³ Author's interview with Mustapha Barghouthi, Ramallah, August 16th, 2007.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

he argues, “and they were especially determined to see the democratization of the PLO. Indeed, in the early stages of negotiations, they wanted the reform of the PNA to proceed in parallel with the reform of the Palestine Liberation Organization. As the negotiations went on, Hamas accepted that these reforms should take place gradually.”²⁵⁵

During the very days in which the agreement had been forged, Ismail Haniyeh had set off on a *hajj* pilgrimage to Makkah, on the occasion of the ‘feast of sacrifice’. For Haniyeh the practicing Muslim, this is one of the pillars of the faith. For Haniyeh the politician, it was the beginning of a tour of Arab countries which would allow him to overcome the local and reductive dimension of the Gaza Strip in order to raise his political profile. He had returned from Makkah with his hair shaved, as is the custom, and donning the kefiyah. In the contemporary Arab world, the kefiyah can have two symbolic meanings: emphasize Hamas nationalist image by accosting Haniyeh’s image to Arafat’s, and distance oneself from the connotation of being Teheran’s agent in the Sunni world by presenting oneself as a true Arab who follows the *sunna*. The Prime Minister of the Hamas government had decided to cut short his diplomatic tour in order to return to Gaza after a new wave of violence had been sparked by the failed attempt to assassinate a high-ranking member of Fatah’s intelligence service in which his three children and a passer-by had been killed instead. The following day, a judge linked to Hamas was executed. Adding to the extremely high tension on the streets, a struggle for power developed between Haniyeh, Egypt and Israel: the Tel Aviv authorities were blocking the Palestinian Prime Minister’s return because he brought with him a suitcase with thirty-five million dollars in it in order to try to bypass the embargo. After lengthy negotiations which resolved in the money being deposited in an Egyptian bank, Haniyeh returns on December 14th through the Rafah crossing, policed by Abu Mazen’s Presidential Guard. At this point violence breaks out: one of Haniyeh’s bodyguards dies and twenty-seven other people are injured in the exchange of fire in what becomes one of the high points of the armed confrontation between Hamas and Fatah. The accusations made by the Islamist movement are clear: it was Muhammad Dahlan who orchestrated the assassination attempt on Haniyeh, and Abbas is morally responsible because control of the Rafah crossing is in the hands of the Presidential Guard. Fatah rejects the accusations, Abbas threatens to call an early election, and violence spreads through the streets and towns of the Gaza Strip, with the risk of spreading to the West Bank as well.

The United States continue to view the *fawda*, the chaos into which Palestinian politics had descended, as an instrument through which to topple the Hamas government. The US Administration’s men say this plainly, in diplomatic meetings. Alvaro De Soto notes in his final report that during a meeting with diplomatic representatives in Washington which took place towards the end of January 2007 – by which time Gaza’s streets had become the scene of the clash between Fatah and Hamas, a near-civil war in which civilians were regularly killed and injured – the US envoy twice remarked upon how much he “liked this violence” because it showed that “other Palestinians are resisting Hamas”.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Alvaro De Soto, *End of Mission Report – Confidential*, op. cit., p. 21. In his investigation, David Rose adds that Condoleezza Rice had telephoned Arab allies towards the end of 2006 so that they would train armed groups linked to Fatah. A consignment of weapons destined for Fatah was then moved into Gaza at the end of December through an Israeli-controlled crossing.

There are, in other words, far too many external pressures for an entirely internal mediation to have any chance of success. Mustapha Barghouthi continues to carry out his duties as facilitator, but the situation only comes unstuck when an Arab patron decides to no longer sit on the sidelines but to intervene throwing all its considerable weight into the discussion. Not Egypt, which at this stage appears to lag behind events, not least due to its own internal political problems, to which Husni Mubarak is paying greater attention. The regional landscape has changed, and domestic politics has a considerable impact on Cairo's ability to mediate internationally. So much so, that Egypt has taken for itself only a small stake in the pressure being applied by Arab countries upon Palestinians, namely security matters. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, takes on the lion's share: the Gordian knot of the conflict between Fatah and Hamas, using in particular all its influence on the Islamic Resistance Movement. The Saudi intervention is based on two factors: first of all, the religious role of the Ibn Saud dynasty in the Sunni world, and secondly the Riyadh's ability to mediate directly with Washington. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has the benefit of occupying a special place in Palestinian politics, not only because of the financial assistance which it has supplied for decades, but also because it is one of the few countries which has long-standing good relations with the Islamist front, despite being one of the United States' closest allies in the region. And of course the Saudi royal family is the custodian of the 'two holy places' in more than just name, a function which – particularly in the mediation between Palestinian groups – is used as leverage in order to place pressure upon the two sides based precisely upon the perception of Riyadh's neutrality. Recently enthroned as the Saudi monarch, King Abdullah decides that it is time to throw all his political weight into resolving the Palestinian political crisis. This should not come as a surprise: in 2002 the then Crown-prince Abdullah was the protagonist of a comprehensive peace plan based on the 'land-for-peace-and-security' principle. This was the only peace plan offered by the Arab world to Israel in nearly a quarter of a century.

The last wave of violence at the beginning of January 2007, which caused a bloody outcome of eighty deaths in the streets of Gaza City, finally prompts King Abdullah into action. At this juncture, Egypt is unable to go beyond a limited role in its mediation, negotiating truces which are reached and then breached on a practically daily basis, lasting no more than a few hours until the negotiation of yet another all-too-temporary truce. In addition, Riyadh is concerned about the growing influence Iran might have gained on the Islamist front, and believes the time has come to exert its own pressure in order to reign in Teheran's ambitions. Thus, Saudi Arabia decides that the time has come to force the two sides to sign an agreement – twisting their arms, if necessary – which should be discussed and signed by the two main parties to the quarrel between Hamas and Fatah, namely Khaled Meshaal and Mahmoud Abbas, and that this discussion and signing should take place in a highly symbolic location. Like Makkah. Here, the agreement is debated and signed far from the tense atmosphere of Gaza, with Meshaal and Abbas even having their picture taken together at prayer, and both presenting themselves in the plain white garb of pilgrimage. According to Osama Hamdan, however, it was Hamas' military pressure in the Gaza Strip which drove Fatah – Muhammad Dahlan, to be precise, who was the most strenuous opponent of the national unity government – to accept the Makkah negotiations, negotiations in which Dahlan himself takes part, and at which cameras and photographers capture his darkened and

irritated expression. Hamdan argues that “in a few hours we had taken the outposts occupied by the Preventive Security in the north of Gaza. This was the reason why Dahlan took part in the Makkah negotiations. He believed he had the support of Israel and of the United States to become the future Palestinian President”.²⁵⁷ Providing a glimpse into the balance of power within Palestinian politics, Hamdan continues: “I had told him well before Abu Ammar’s death, during a meeting in Cairo, after Dahlan had attacked us falsely accusing us of the death of a Fatah member, that one cannot become Palestinian President without Hamas’ consent”.²⁵⁸

On February 8th, Mahmoud Abbas and Khaled Meshaal reach an agreement on a national unity government: it is a detailed agreement, which betrays the difficulties which both sides had in trusting one another. Abu Mazen designates Ismail Haniyeh as the new administration’s Prime Minister with a letter of charge which indicates the distribution of roles among the twenty-four positions available. The number of Ministers has remained unchanged, Hamas retains the post of Prime Minister along with another eight ministerial posts compared to Fatah’s six, while five go to independents and four to other political groups. Among the most interesting appointments there are Salam Fayyad, a much-loved figure within the international community, to the Treasury; and the Foreign Minister Ziad Abu Amr, from Gaza, is a scholar of ‘political Islam’, and thus is well-acquainted with Hamas. The Islamist movement, on the other hand, loses the key post at the Ministry of the Interior, but reserves the right to put forward an independent figure, Hani al-Qawasmeh, approved by Abbas. As expected, the President’s letter mentions relations with Israel and with the international community, asking the Prime Minister to “commit to the higher interests of the Palestinian people” and to “work in order to achieve its national goals as was approved by the Palestine National Council, the clauses of the Basic Law and the National Reconciliation Document [i.e. the ‘prisoners’ document]”, and to “respect international resolutions and the agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization”. Haniyeh would then sign this letter a week later, on February 15th, after resigning from his previous premiership, thereby accepting its contents. From Damascus, Moussa Abu Marzouq explains the difference between the Hamas leadership and Abbas thus: “The main difference between us, perhaps the only difference, regards [...the] agreements” previously signed by the PLO. Abu Marzouq adds: “It is now a matter of one word. We said we would honour past agreements, Abbas wants us to comply with them. But some of these agreements go against Palestinian interests. We can talk with Israel and others on how best to correct some of these agreements”.²⁵⁹ Mustapha Barghouthi echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that “the last Quartet document before Makkah asked that the national unity government reflect the conditions it requested in its program, not that it adhere to these. Then, after the government had been formed, they changed their minds”.²⁶⁰

In practice, the agreement reached in Makkah is in substance the agreement Barghouthi had negotiated towards the end of November, with the Saudi seal of approval. The only difference is that the February 8th agreement contains Ismail Haniyeh’s name as

²⁵⁷ Author’s interview with Osama Hamdan, Beirut, November 15th, 2008.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, “After Mecca: Engaging Hamas”, cit., p. 18. Abu Marzouq pronounces these words two weeks ahead of the Makkah agreement.

²⁶⁰ Author’s interview with Mustapha Barghouthi, Ramallah, August 16th, 2007.

Prime Minister, and that in the November agreement the Prime Minister was no longer supposed to be Abul Abed. The agreement reached in the shadow of the Kaaba, which the protagonists can see from the windows of the Saudi royal palace, in the very heart of the Sunni Muslim world, is received on the Palestinian street as though it were little short of a miracle, as the triumph of common sense during a delicate and dangerous phase of the PNA's brief existence. Palestinian politics had certainly been through periods of extreme litigiousness even insoluble conflicts between strong personalities within the PLO leadership – particularly between the late Seventies and early Eighties – as well as divisions within and splits from established parties. But the physical level of these clashes had never reached such an intensity or produced such a high level of casualties. The specter of a civil war – a civil war fought by armed groups, and which certainly did not extend into or involve the civilian population – was transforming daily life in Gaza. The civil war was limited – so to speak – to security organizations, which had not melted like snow under the sun upon Abu Mazen's rise to the Presidency. This despite the fact that in the later years of Abbas' career the reduction in the number of organizations had become an inderogable priority, the *sine qua non* of his strategy, which he was certain could also provide the basis for a re-opening of the peace process with the Israelis. And yet, in a way, it is precisely the degree to which such clashes involved only armed groups which provides an indication of just how much they had become an instrument of a political game only one part of which was being played out between Ramallah and Gaza City, and which to different degrees and in different ways more broadly involved several international actors.

The Bush administration's support for the security organizations linked to the PNA Presidency is proclaimed in broad daylight. It is justified in terms of the need to strengthen the only partner which both the Americans and the European Union considers reliable: Abu Mazen. Between the end of 2006 and early 2007, however, the flow of funds, the increasing presence of American officers in Jerusalem, Jericho and Ramallah, and the very preparation of protocols and of training camps in Jordan and in Egypt gradually shift the emphasis of this support from simply increasing security within the PNA's Territory to a fully-fledged attempt to shore up one side in the conflict against the other. The Presidential Guard, which was divided into different groupings, was pitted against the Executive Force which took its orders from the Interior Ministry headed by Said Siyyam. Rashid Abu Shbak's Preventive Security Force, which was Muhammad Dahlan's operational arm, was pitted against the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. The difference is that Western help provided between 2006 and 2007 to the security organizations linked to the Presidency was out in the open, so much so that it increases accusations – which come from further afield than just Hamas supporters – that they are on the Americans' payroll. The support provided to organizations linked to Hamas, on the other hand, is not explicitly and clearly claimed, even when indiscretions on the flow of funds from Iran and Syria appear in the international press: indeed, even had there been such funding, the Islamist movement would have steered well clear of advertising the fact. In any case, the strengthening of security bodies on both sides cannot at this point be stopped: while the national unity government holds together, the fragile executive born from the Makkah agreement attempts to forge a path caught between the Scylla and Charibdyis of skepticism and outright sabotage. It would not last three months.

The three-month adventure

Hamas wanted legitimization from Europe. Hamas leaders say as much, arguing that European diplomacy had promised to recognize the Islamist movement had it agreed to form a national unity government. Mustapha Barghouthi, whose mediation was principally responsible for bringing the national unity government about, also supports this statement. Barghouthi says that “Hamas signed the agreement because it wanted the embargo to be lifted, and I promised them as much because I was in turn promised this by many European Foreign Ministers, including Italy’s Massimo D’Alema, who had been one of the best. But in Europe there is a system whereby two or three states can manage to block decisions...”. This account is confirmed by those facilitators and consultants who during that period undertook the subtle work of talking to both parties on the sidelines, conveying each party’s desiderata and, more often, its *sine qua non* conditions. Hamas’ leaders in Gaza, in the West Bank and abroad also agree on this interpretation. All support the same version of events, namely that the prospect of the end of the international boycott put in place thanks to the Quartet had been the turning point in the mediation which brought Hamas to share power with Fatah. Nasser al-Din al-Sha’er, formerly Deputy Prime Minister in the Hamas government of March 2006, says that “it was already common knowledge where Haniyeh would have traveled first as Prime Minister of a future national unity government of which Hamas would have been a part: London”. As the Sebastya-born Islamist leader recalls, the promise to recognize a national unity government of which Hamas would be a part “had come from the offices of the Prime ministers in European capitals”. There are those who, requesting anonymity, are even more precise: the Norwegian Foreign Minister (although Norway was not a member of the European Union); the Spanish, through a direct channel in the Prime Minister’s office; Javier Solana, ‘Mr. European Foreign Policy’ himself, had told the Egyptians and the Saudis as much. The Germans also spoke about this possibility, although the Italians – under then Foreign Minister Massimo D’Alema²⁶¹ – promised nothing.

At the official level, European diplomats deny ever having promised Hamas – which had been included in the list of terrorist organizations during Italy’s presidency of the EU in 2003 – recognition unless it met the four conditions which the Quartet had set out in spring of 2006. European diplomacy itself had reacted quite ambiguously to the Makkah Agreement, with France appearing much more flexible than Germany, which held the EU Presidency at the time, and which under Chancellor Angela Merkel was gradually moving closer to Israel. Alastair Croke, however, argues that at a certain point the European Commission became far more intransigent towards Hamas, placing before it not the Quartet’s four conditions, but rather seven points which Hamas would have to fulfill.²⁶² In private, however, well-informed European diplomatic sources wishing to remain anonymous confirm that it is true that Hamas had been promised the lifting of the embargo had they entered a national unity government, on condition that they sent a

²⁶¹ Massimo D’Alema confirmed that no promise had been made to end Hamas’ isolation. Author’s interview with Massimo D’Alema, Jerusalem, September 5th, 2007.

²⁶² Author’s interview with Alastair Croke, London, July 12th 2008.

signal in the direction of the recognition of Israel: “That signal was sent, and we found it to be a good starting point”.

The signal of which diplomatic sources speak is a statement made by Khaled Meshaal to Reuters on January 10th, 2007, in other words before the Makkah Agreement on the national unity government. Meshaal did not recognize Israel directly, but did so indirectly, indicating Palestinian requests: “We in Hamas are with the general Palestinian and Arab position and we are with the consensus of the necessity of establishing a Palestinian state on the June 4th [1967] borders, including (East) Jerusalem, the right of return and the withdrawal of Israel to these borders”.²⁶³ When the journalist specifically asked whether accepting the 1967 borders implied the existence of Israel, Meshaal replied by again asking that Israel, in turn, recognize a Palestinian state. Meshaal stated that “the problem is not that there is an entity called Israel”, adding: “there is a reality that Israel exists on Palestinian territory. The problem is that the Palestinian state does not exist. My concern as a Palestinian is to found this state. International relations are not based just on recognition”.²⁶⁴ As if that weren’t enough, Meshaal had repeated this idea after the establishment of the national unity government, and it is no coincidence that he did so in Cairo, the home of Husni Mubarak, who had notoriously been marginalized by the Saudi mediation. On February 22nd, Meshaal had said: “the Palestinian people are suggesting a realistic objective. It wants a Palestinian state based on the borders of June 4th, 1967, including Jerusalem and the right of return for all refugees, without settlements, and including the release of all hostages [i.e. Palestinian prisoners detained in Israeli jails]. This is a realistic request which the Palestinian people makes through the Makkah Agreement and through a political consensus required by a national unity government”.

The signal which the Europeans had asked for behind the scenes had come, restated several times not just by Meshaal but also by Ismail Haniyeh, for example in his inaugural speech as Prime Minister of the national unity government, but also by a plethora of leaders and spokespeople over the next few months. This signal, however, fails to overcome the remaining obstacles to a more incisive as well as gradual diplomatic intervention in recognition of the new Palestinian political reality.

From a formal point of view, something did indeed change with the advent of the national unity government. Although the movement itself remained listed among terrorist groups, the European Union can now bypass the prohibition on meeting Hamas members. Indeed, the EU organized meetings with independent members of the executive, from Ziad Abu Amr to Mustapha Barghouthi himself, who had been appointed Minister for Information, to Salam Fayyad, towards whom many governments who had previously denied him access, now opened their doors. This stance should not be surprising. Fayyad is the most respected Palestinian abroad, as much as President Mahmoud Abbas. The newly appointed Finance Minister knows the Western world very well, having gained a Masters degree and a Doctorate from the University of Texas, having worked as an economist in the World Bank for eight years until 1995, and having spent time in Jerusalem as a representative of the International Monetary Fund. Thus, as far as the West is concerned, he is reliable, permitting a loosening of the purse strings of

²⁶³ Q&A with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal, Reuters, January 10th, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSL1046412720070110>.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

international aid as well as of Arab support, allowing the now nearly-empty coffers of the Palestinian National Authority to be replenished.

The funds, however, cannot resolve all problems. The question of the security organizations remains on the table. The Executive Force has not disbanded after Said Siyyam's resignation from the Interior Ministry. Hamas is not launching rockets, but it is not stopping other smaller factions from doing so, breaking the calm in Sderot and other Israeli cities in the Negev with the fear which the Qassam rockets bring with them. Equally, on the other side, the Presidency's, few steps forward have been made. Indeed, the atmosphere becomes overheated when Abbas appoints Muhammad Dahlan to the post of National Security Advisor, illustrating all too vividly how important his role was within the Presidency. Nonetheless, despite the tensions, the image one gets of the higher echelons of Palestinian institutions is still one of unity, so much so that they are jointly present on the most important stage for regional politics, the Arab League summit which takes place at the end of March in Riyadh, on the Saudis' home turf. The Palestinian delegation is two-headed, but both President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh tend to present themselves as a symbol of a rediscovered Palestinian national unity: they share the same plane to travel to Riyadh, and are both greeted by a high-level welcome by the Saudis. Indeed, King Abdullah takes advantage of the spotlight trained on the Palestinians to reiterate the proposal set out in 2002 at the Beirut summit, at a time when Abdullah was still Regent and the throne belonged to King Fahd. Abdullah, in other words, reiterates the old 'Saudi Peace Plan' which Ariel Sharon had already rejected at the time. Hamas responds ambiguously to the request to accept the Saudi plan as a basis for negotiations, a plan which included the idea of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert responds in an equally ambiguous but positive fashion. It does appear as though a new phase is dawning in the Middle East, seeing that Hamas leaders themselves are considering the Saudi plan carefully, indicating on several occasions that they would be ready to talk about it. Disaster, however, is barely around the corner.

Mustapha Barghouthi again picks up the story: "The Agreement lasted two months, then violations began on both sides, until things deteriorated. It was the extremist wings in Hamas and Fatah who sabotaged the agreement. Dahlan and Abed Rabbo, on one side. A-Zahhar and Siyyam on the other". Hamas was of course divided into various factions, but Fatah itself also contained within it very different positions with respect to the national unity government. As Barghouthi says, "there were moderates like Abu Mazen, and extremists like Muhammad Dahlan and Yasser Abed Rabbo" who were against the agreement and who later played a very important role in weakening it: "Abu Mazen supported my effort, he wanted a solution, he did not want a confrontation". The hawks were themselves divided: amongst them, some were more closely linked to international circles, and some of them were inside the national unity government. Mustapha Barghouthi accuses them directly, albeit without naming names²⁶⁵, saying it was precisely these individuals who, when they went abroad, would say "wait, don't send the money, because the situation will change soon. And that's precisely what happened".

Those working against an agreement, however, are not to be found exclusively within Fatah and Hamas, which were at the core of the executive. As Barghouthi again recalls: "What changed the situation was the power of the pressure exerted by Israel and

²⁶⁵ Author's interview with Mustapha Barghouthi, Ramallah, August 16th, 2007.

the United States, and by the weakness of the European position, the inability of the EU and of the Arab states to counterbalance Israel and the United States. Ultimately, it was the Israelis who dictated the political line, in order to continue to have a weak Palestinian counterpart, not a strong one, as would have happened with a national unity government. They did not want real negotiations with us. Palestinian democracy began to represent a threat, to Israel as to other states in the region. Hamas was not the target of the attacks against the national unity government: it was Palestinian democracy itself, because the executive represented 96 percent of voters”. Barghouthi is irritated: “The government’s program was progressive and secular, the part related to women was much better than under Salam Fayyad’s executive, and the same can be said for other parts, from education to culture, which were very clear. It was a program which called for a total and reciprocal ceasefire”.

The ‘Second Liberation’

June 2007. Rumors have been circulating for days. It is said that the men of the Preventive Security Force close to Muhammad Dahlan, who has for years been considered Fatah’s strongman in the Strip, were going to attempt to overthrow Hamas in Gaza. And that the Preventive Security Force was going to carry out its attempt just after the *tawjihi*. It is difficult to think of final examinations in high school – like the *tawjihi* – as an event of such importance that it could represent a specific watershed, one thanks to which a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ might be marked. It is not so difficult to imagine within the Arab world, however, where the *tawjihi* is both a rite of passage, a goal to reach to better one’s future, and a mark of honor for a family. Students lose sleep and peace of mind for the *tawjihi*, fathers invest their money in private lessons, and the whole family supports the children to the utmost, in order to then celebrate those children as though they had graduated with honors. For the school year 2006/07, the Palestinian National Authority had set the date for the *tawjihi* for June 11th. Fifty thousand students present between West Bank and Gaza, nearly half of them in the Strip alone. At least two hundred did not manage to sit that exam: nine of the centers in which the *tawjihi* was to take place in Gaza City and three more in the southern city of Khan Younis, not far from the Egyptian border, close because of the battle raging on the streets. The first clashes between Fatah’s and Hamas’ armed men take place in the Strip the day before the eve of the exams, on June 9th, when minor scraps in the Tel al-Sultan district in Rafah act as a detonator for seven days of armed confrontations. At the end of these seven days of fratricidal war on the streets of Gaza, the Islamist movement takes total control of Gaza.

Before or after the *tawjihi*: the battle for Gaza has taken place around a high school exam chosen as a watershed. At least, this is the most reliable version of events not just within Hamas’ political wing, but also among the circle of experts and journalists who most closely followed post-Arafat Palestinian politics. The most important pragmatists within Hamas, for example, have more than once stated that they knew nothing of the coup, but that there were insistent rumors going round according to which armed groups linked to Dahlan “were planning to do something after the *tawjihi* examinations”.²⁶⁶ Ahmed Youssef, Ismail Haniyeh’s main political adviser, told the

²⁶⁶ International Crisis Group, *After Gaza*, op. cit., p. 13.

International Crisis Group experts that “we knew they were training and smuggling weapons. We have seen the confessions and tapes. There is enough information to prove to the whole world those people were planning a civil war in which 10,000 would be killed. All the time we felt something was coming but we had no plan to take over Gaza”.²⁶⁷ Ahmed Youssef’s version has been reiterated several times.

“The evening of the coup, we were in a car together, Ghazi and I.” The Ghazi to whom Ahmed Youssef refers in November 2007 in his Gaza City office, with his lights on in full daylight because the curtains were drawn for security reasons, is Ghazi Hamad, who until June 2007 had been Haniyeh’s spokesman. He was one of the mend of the ‘middle generation’, considered to be the symbol of Hamas’ wing favoring participation. “We were returning home to our families in Rafah” he continues. “Don’t you think that if the coup had been planned a long time before, that the two of us, Ghazi and I, given our positions within the government, we would have stayed in Gaza City to follow events?”²⁶⁸. Ghazi Hamad was Ismail Haniyeh’s spokesperson, Ahmed Youssef his closest adviser, and Ismail Haniyeh was even at that time considered to be the leader of Hamas’ moderate wing. From the West Bank, Hamas backs the same version. According to Farhat “What happened in June was not prepared”. At the time, As’ad was the movement’s spokesperson, and he had spent many years in Israeli jails, he was formerly one of Hamas’ coordinators during the Second Intifada, and had been the overall coordinator of Hamas’ electoral campaign for the 2006 general elections. In other words: he knew the movement intimately.

“If something *had* been decided”, he adds sitting in a chair in his Ramallah home, facing the Israeli settlement of Psagot, barely a few weeks after having been released from jail in October 2008, “this was the response of the military wing in February 2007”. February 2007, that is to say before the Makkah Agreement from which the short-lived national unity government which would last barely three months would emerge. In February, before that agreement, Gaza had been plunged back into violence. Factions linked to Fatah target the Islamic University in Gaza City, Hamas’ *alma mater*, and one of the Muslim Brotherhood’s bastions in the Strip. Buildings are hit, thousands of books are burned, and then a communiqué is released to the press stating that an arms cache had allegedly been found there and that seven armed Iranian ‘advisers’ had been arrested. There would never be any confirmation of either that find or of the arrests. What was not late in coming was Hamas’ response. From reports at the time, it is known that armed groups linked to the Islamist movement effectively took control of the streets in Gaza. What Farhat As’ad refers to, however, is that Hamas goes well beyond this: it also takes control of around fifty buildings in which forces linked to Fatah are concentrated, confirming the version provided by Osama Hamdan to explain Muhammad Dahlan’s participation in the meetings in Makkah. This occupation lasts less than five hours, just to send a precise military signal: if Hamas wanted to, it could take control of the Strip. But it doesn’t want to. According to As’ad, the difference between what happened in February 2007 and what happened four months later lies precisely in this message, the message which was not sent out. In June, the coup had not been prepared, but the clashes had provoked a chain reaction, a rapid reaction, and one from which there was no going

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁶⁸ Author’s interview with Ahmed Youssef, Gaza City, November 6th, 2007.

back. Hamas had no military plan. This version is also confirmed by Salah Bardawil,²⁶⁹ born 1959, professor of literature, from Khan Younis, and a Hamas member ever since its inception. These different accounts strengthen the hypothesis that Hamas' military wing – both the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and the Executive Force linked to Said Siyyam's Interior Ministry – had in fact prevaricated upon the political wing, deciding to force its hand to the most extreme consequences for fear that time would have played in Fatah's favor. Or rather, that it would have favored that portion of Fatah which was pressing for a final confrontation with Hamas: the portion linked to Muhammad Dahlan, who at that time was considered even in some Western circles as the final bulwark against Hamas' preponderant power within the Strip.

The unresolved tensions between security organizations – organizations which answer to their respective factions and not to the PNA's institutions – explode a month before the showdown, in mid-May, in two nearly simultaneous episodes which mark the end of the brief truce between Gaza's armed factions. On May 14th, a Hamas commando breaks into a training base for Mahmoud Abbas' Presidential Guard near Karni, the commercial crossing which bridges Gaza and Israel: eight men loyal to Abu Mazen are killed. During that period about four hundred and fifty Fatah men, who had been trained by the Egyptians, entered the Strip with Israeli consent through a crossing, the crossing of Rafah, which had been nearly consistently closed for a year and a half. The entry of Fatah men is perceived by Hamas not only as an unmitigated slap in the face by its partner in government, but more especially as the signal that armed groups linked to the nationalist party – at least, those close to Muhammad Dahlan – are re-arming. An indirect confirmation that something dangerous is happening within the security institutions is provided by the resignation of the Minister for the Interior, the independent Hani al-Qawasmeh, tendered to Ismail Haniyeh on May 14th, and accompanied by extremely harsh accusations to all parties concerned, including the Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and President Mahmoud Abbas, who had not given him the necessary power to reorganize security in Gaza, over and above individual armed factions.

Accusations leveled not just at Hamas, but also at Fatah. Complete with names and surnames. Specifically, Rashid Abu Shbak, who is head of the Preventive Security Force, Director General of the Interior Ministry, and one of Muhammad Dahlan's lieutenants. One May 11th, Abu Shbak had ordered thousands of Fatah's armed men to deploy on the Strip's roads without warning the Executive Force headed by Hamas, and most importantly without asking for Minister Qawasmeh's permission. This considerably raised tension levels which had quietened down after the establishment of the national unity government. This decision taken by Abu Shbak turned out to be crucial, and was perceived by Hamas as a full-blown provocation, as well as being harshly criticized by circles close to Abu Mazen. The positions taken by Abu Shbak and by Muhammad Dahlan would confuse an already tense situation even further: according to one of the best Israeli analysts, Danny Rubinstein, they apparently opposed Qawasmeh's basic

²⁶⁹ On the first anniversary of the *tawjih* coup, Bardawil, spokesperson for Hamas' Parliamentary party, confirmed that the taking of Gaza "had never been part of Hamas' plans" (Agence France Press, June 15th, 2008). And yet, during those very same days Bardawil had used extremely harsh words towards Fatah, arguing that Hamas "would fight to the end" in order to "eliminate those elements within Fatah which have tortured and killed our men". "This is our final decision and we will not go back on it" (Khaled Abu Toameh, Abbas accuses Hamas of staging a "bloody coup", in *Jerusalem Post*, June 12th, 2007).

request, namely control over all internal security organizations. Thus, in the complicated power balances between different forces within the Gaza Strip, which is constantly at risk of descending into anarchy, Rashid Abu Shbak becomes the target to hit, as far as Hamas' military wing is concerned, the highest objective, the one to attack when the battle reaches its apex. That target is attacked on May 16th, by a commando which breaks into his house and kills four bodyguards. Abu Shbak and his family are not hurt, but the message has reached its intended recipient: the space for negotiation between Hamas and Fatah is growing ever smaller because the two factions' military wings are taking over.

This is the reason why the situation precipitates over the short span of three weeks charged with tension. American envoy General Keith Dayton – the true protagonist of Fatah's re-armament and of the thanks to a training program designed to strengthen Mahmoud Abbas' Presidential Guard – realizes this himself. Keith Dayton is in charge of a fifty-nine million dollar assistance program authorized by the US Congress, and formally aimed at reinforcing the Presidential Guard, the goods-only Karni crossing between Gaza and Israel, and Abu Mazen's national security office. The "security assistance" goal, as Dayton himself tells a subcommittee in the Chamber of Representatives twenty days before the coup in Gaza, is "to help create the conditions necessary to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace via the *road map*" and, as a first step, to give the presidential guard "a 'security horizon', the safety of knowing they have support and a future". Dayton argues that "National Security Forces and civil police, the forces tasked with the day-to-day responsibility for ensuring law and order, do not have that assurance" because they have to "face a daunting challenge not only by Hamas' Executive Force but also its military force, Izz al Din al Qassam Brigades, both of whom continue to receive support from Iran and Syria".²⁷⁰

Dayton, who has been the US coordinator for security since November 2005, has from the very outset of his mandate had a purely military perception of the Palestinian situation, entirely focused on armed conflict between factions, with the hope and the determination that at the end of this confrontation it will be Fatah which will prevail, ending Hamas' brief period in power. The signs have been abundantly clear for a long time, with Dayton having met Dahlan several times over the previous few months both in Jerusalem and in Ramallah. The American strategy towards the PNA Presidency which pushes Quartet envoy Alvaro De Soto to the point of resigning his assignment, and not doing so quietly.

As time passes, rumors abound in both the local and international press. They speak of the arrival in the Gaza Strip of the Badr Brigade, a Hashemite unit manned by Palestinians resident in Jordan and said to be loyal to Fatah. The unit has apparently been visited several times by officials from the European Union and the United States. Again in May an internal American document is made public in which Muhammad Dahlan is indicated as being the reference point for a plan drawn up by Dayton in order to stop the launch of Qassam rockets from border areas towards Israeli cities in the Negev by armed Palestinian factions in Gaza. The forces under Dahlan's command were scheduled to deploy in the target areas by June 21st. The four hundred and fifty Fatah fighters who cross the border at Rafah in mid-May appear to confirm this scenario. The authorities in

²⁷⁰ Remarks by U.S. Security Coordinator LTG Keith Dayton, Update on the Israeli-Palestinian Situation and Palestinian Assistance Programs, House of Foreign Affairs Middle East and South Asia Sub-Committee, n. 23, May 2007.

Cairo had given their blessing, as had the Israelis, and even the Europeans who had manned the crossing ever since November 2005 under the direction of a contingent of Italian Carabinieri commanded by General Pietro Pistolese. According to the calculations carried out by the International Crisis Group²⁷¹, very little has passed through the Rafah crossing, which has remained closed for over two thirds of the time during the year before the Hamas coup in Gaza. Even members of the Palestinian government have had problems re-entering Gaza with dollar-filled suitcases. And yet, four hundred and fifty Fatah fighters pass through the crossing without a hitch.

The Israelis themselves have a role to play in the confrontation between Fatah and Hamas. On May 20th, the home of Khalil al-Hayyah is attacked. Al-Hayyah is Hamas Deputy and head of the Parliamentary wing, but more importantly he is the most prominent amongst the negotiators who have secured truces between the Islamist movement and Fatah over the previous few months. Al-Hayyah had also been one of the most influential figures between 2006 and 2007 in the attempts to form a national unity government, both before and after the Makkah Agreement. Moreover, he is one of the Hamas leaders who is charged with the most delicate of briefs: the negotiations over the Islamist movement's entry into the PLO. In the Israeli air force's raid kills seven among al-Hayyah's family members, while he himself was at the Egyptian embassy putting the finishing touches to the agreement for the sixth truce with Fatah. From then on, a string of episodes ensue, pieces of a puzzle which will come together in the clash to come, while Gaza's streets fill with armed men affiliated to opposing factions: the men of Rashid Abu Shbak's Preventive Security Force who towards the end of May will in any case decide to leave the Strip and take refuge in the West Bank, and Said Siyyam, who in the months ahead would be revealed as the link between Hamas' military and political wings. Thousands of young men in arms, tense, deployed throughout urban centers from Gaza City to Khan Younis, all the way north towards the border with Israel. Lighting a spark is all too easy, and in this context the ongoing attempts to provide some mediation – such as Egypt's, through the powerful head of its intelligence services, Omar Suleyman – prove of little use. At least seven truces, all broken within a few hours or days at the most, succeed each other in the space of barely a month. Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh even attempts to declare a ceasefire in order to allow the *tawjihi* to take place. All in vain: the 2007 *tawjihi* will be remembered as the *tawjihi* of Hamas' coup in Gaza.

The battle commences on June 9th, in the Tel al- Sultan district in the Southern part of the Strip, spreading north to Gaza City, where it rages on the rooftops. In the run-up to the clashes, armed groups from both Fatah and Hamas had taken control of strategic rooftops across the city, the ones from which the main arteries and important buildings can be controlled. Because of the lack of space, the only way of compensating for pressure on housing is to build upwards. This basic necessity means Gaza City is full of tall buildings, up to and even beyond ten floors high. At the beginning of June, young men with M16s and grenade launchers will play war with what little Gaza has to offer. With roofs, for a start. It is from rooftops that the centers of power are if not controlled then at least targeted, from ministries to the compounds of security forces or important leaders. Opponents have been thrown from rooftops. The first, for example: Muhammad Salama al-Swairki, twenty-seven, and a member of Abu Mazen's Presidential Guard,

²⁷¹ International Crisis Group, "Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas", *ICG Middle East Report*, n. 73, March 19th, 2008, p. 4.

thrown off the fifteenth floor of the Ghefari Tower. Or Hussam Muhammad Abu Qainas, thirty-five-year-old Hamas militant, thrown from the eleventh floor of the Muhanna building in a district in southern Gaza during the evening of the very same day, the 10th of June. The two men executed from those towers are exemplary of what happened during that bloody week in Gaza in which there was no place for pity on either side of the conflict, neither amongst Hamas' men, who riddled some of their most fearsome adversaries with bullets, nor amongst Fatah's, who did not spare imams or defenseless men. Armed clashes took place in the streets, amongst civilians, and inside hospitals. Until, on June 14th, the entire of the Strip is firmly in Hamas' hands and Fatah's men are on the run, fleeing either towards the West Bank or towards Egypt in order to escape further retaliation by the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades or the Executive Force at the orders of the Palestinian Interior Ministry. Hamas' hawks speak of a 'second liberation': the first, in 2005, had been the 'liberation' from the Israeli armed forces and from the settlers, who had left the boundaries of the Strip after the unilateral withdrawal which had been decided upon by Ariel Sharon's government. Two years later, again in summer, the 'second liberation', this time from those parts of Fatah's armed wing with which conflict had never really ended.

Governing the Strip

"A strategic error". This is what Ghazi Hamad calls it. The coup "produced a thousand other political problems that Hamas could have done without". When the guns finally fall silent, politics again moves center-stage, albeit with far less weight than before. For Hamas' leadership, the *tawjihi* coup becomes just too difficult a challenge to win at the level of the administration of public life. After June 2007, administering power in Gaza means struggling on two fronts: the first is traditional, so to speak, namely relations with Israel, which in some ways is the simplest to deal with in terms of popular consensus. There is, however, an entirely internal second front, upon which a battle is fought not just with Fatah, but with the very structures of the Palestinian National Authority itself, as it distances itself from Gaza and establishes parallel institutions. In the immediate aftermath of Hamas taking power in Gaza, Mahmoud Abbas does not even attempt to mend the rift, but rather dismisses Ismail Haniyeh from his position as Prime Minister and installs a new Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, as well as a new executive in Ramallah, thereby sealing the geographical as well as political break between the two centers of gravity of the Occupied Territory. In the space of a few brief days a two-headed Palestine is created, or rather two Palestinian entities are established. On the one hand, there is Gaza, now firmly under Hamas' control, so that the Islamist movement can manage only a very small territory, but one in which the Israeli armed forces are not present. On the other hand, there is the West Bank, which does not suffer from international isolation, and indeed is the sole recipient of humanitarian and financial aid, but at the same time sees Israeli soldiers deployed in the countryside, in the villages, and even inside its very cities, as well as around the settlements.

Over the following months, Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad, supported by the group of advisers around them and by Western countries, consolidate the separation of the West Bank from Gaza. The Hamas leadership finds itself having to take charge of

public institutions which they did not wish for in the first place, when Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Accords giving rise to the PNA, one which they did not contribute to the growth of, and one which they ultimately accepted as the lesser of all evils in order to change both the Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization from the inside. Thus, by seizing power in Gaza, the Islamist leadership finds itself forced to administer the Strip and its inhabitants through a system of which they had barely begun to learn the rules, the mechanisms, and the ministries themselves. The impression one gets is that it is though they feel like guests in their own homes: they use the bureaucracies, the machineries, the photocopiers as though they were expecting the legitimate owners to return. The hope that the clash between Ramallah and Gaza, between Fatah and Hamas might be overcome, however, dwindle as time passes, and the Hamas administration increasingly loses its feeling of transience, taking on the classic signs of an administration in the process of consolidating the provision of peoples' basic necessities. For a start, Hamas attempts to establish a parallel bureaucracy, particularly in response to the boycott against it organized in Ramallah, which has continued to pay PNA officials and employees in Gaza on condition that they do not go to work in the offices now controlled by Hamas. This meant blocking the machinery of government as much as possible: not just employees, not just judges, but also doctors, nurses, teachers all stay home, only to queue up in banks or at cash machines to draw their paycheques in lines which give an immediate sense of who is siding with whom.

The Palestinian government's internal isolation thus pushes the Islamist movement towards a management of everyday functions through an emergency administration. As a minister in Ismail Haniyeh's *de facto* government – the third, after the single-party administration of March 2006 and the national unity government which follows a year later – comments, “we are managing a crisis, we aren't setting out a program for government”. There are two crucial elements in the administrative crisis, aside from the increasingly tight blockade the Strip is subjected to: firstly, the lack of personnel as a result of the Fatah boycott, and secondly the lack of a budget with which to meet the needs of Gaza's inhabitant-citizens. The first obstacle is overcome by means of a reduction in wages and through the employment of young people, often freshly out of university, who are less ‘expensive’ than their older counterparts. According to journalistic sources, the second problem, the lack of finances, is assuaged by means of the collection of municipal taxes, car license fees, and a tax on the contraband of cigarettes across the southern border at Rafah which divides Gaza from Egypt, as well as through a similar ‘tax’ placed on those who run commercial tunnels passing underneath the border through which everything and anything that manages to pass into the Strip is smuggled to then be sold on to a population which is lacking in everything.

Thus, Hamas plugs the gap left by the Palestinian Authority and in the words of the International Crisis Group experts “by boycotting the security, judicial and other government sectors, the PA turned an intended punitive measure into an unintentional gift, creating a vacuum Hamas dutifully filled. From courts to municipalities, the Islamists asserted control of institutions on which the PA pulled the plug”.²⁷² As the months wear on, Hamas' grip consolidates through exemplary cases and symbolic gestures. Despite the economic blockade imposed by the international community through the Quartet's decisions, despite the lack of fuel and electricity provided by Israel,

²⁷² Ibid., p. 6.

the entry barred to basic goods like cement or spare parts, Gaza works: for example in refuse collection, which no longer pile up on the Strip's streets but are collected thanks to a process each quarter, each district, as well as the refugee camps would take charge of providing their own services. Gaza also works in security terms: after a sense of uncertainty and of anarchy in the years before the coup, after the kidnappings of foreigners and the presence of powerful clans on the ground, the administration of security returns into the hands of a single organization: it is the Executive Force which is charged with Gaza's internal security, leaving the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades the job of facing the Israelis. As months go by, the Executive Force becomes Gaza's *police*. Indeed, it is as a police force that the Executive Force wishes to be regarded, as the 2007-2008 poster campaign plastering the streets of the Strip's towns demonstrate, not least to change the name with which they were known from *tanfisiyya* – the term by which the Executive Force was known – to police force, from a partisan armed faction to a security force serving all Gazans, a force which women apply to, as at least one hundred do, according to the account provided by Taghreed al-Khodary for the *New York Times*.

From time to time, the Palestinian press as well as the Israeli, publish polls which speak of a gradual loss of popular consensus for Hamas. It is impossible to verify the value of statistical examinations which attempt to measure the state of mind of a population on its knees after suffering and immense daily difficulties such as Gaza's. One thing is certain: despite all its internal differences, the movement's cohesiveness was never in question. The kidnapping of Gilad Shalit, the Israeli Army corporal abducted by armed Palestinians just across Gaza's border with Israel at the end of June 2006 demonstrates as much: since then, no one has been able to obtain reliable information, or information of any value, concerning the location Shalit was being held at, despite the fact that Gaza is a very small sliver of land within which Israel has built a network of informants over the years. Nothing has ever come to light about the young Israeli soldier unless Hamas has decided to release information on his state of health.

In order to avoid scaring off the international community, Hamas leaders have emphasized several times that the Islamist movement had no intention of establishing an emirate, a caliphate or any entity in which the Islamist model of Hamas' old Charter would become reality. Salah al-Bardawil, for example, has stated that Hamas wishes to "create a honorable model"²⁷³. The Hamas leadership have made an attempt to manage daily life in Gaza without impacting more than strictly necessary on existing power structures in the Strip, while simultaneously attempting to resolve the rupture with Ramallah and overcome the uniquely diarchic situation the Palestinian Territory find themselves in. If the attempt to reach the first goal has objectively succeeded, despite the doubts and concerns raised by human rights associations particularly with regard to the fate of the Fatah-led political opposition within the Strip, the second objective – mending relations with the nationalist movement inspired by Yasser Arafat – has been problematic from its very inception: neither Hamas nor Fatah trust each other anymore, and both fear losing even a single iota of their power.

Thus, whether from partisan sources or independent bodies, accusations fly to and fro between the West Bank and Gaza of arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial assassinations and so on attributed to the various groups which – claiming diverse legitimization and under the guise of a number of different organizations – manage

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 15.

security in West Bank towns and within the Strip. The accusations are similar, the targets are on opposite fronts. Fatah accuses the Executive Force of having carried out arbitrary arrests, harassment, and torture, they accuse the Force of shooting on demonstrators in the few protests which the nationalist movement has organized, of interrupting wedding ceremonies, and ultimately of making the Strip feel like a 'regime'. For its part, Hamas accuses the security organizations loyal to Mahmoud Abbas of carrying out the arrest of hundreds of Islamist militants, of managing West Bank towns in which Palestinian military personnel are deployed – Nablus, Jenin, and Hebron – with an iron fist and what's more in a none-too-hidden cooperation with the Israeli armed forces. In the West Bank, youth on the street similarly speak of a 'regime atmosphere', supported by those who are nicknamed 'the Dayton guys', the men belonging to the security organizations trained in the context of the plan set up by US General Keith Dayton. The rupture, in other words, gets worse over time, reaching peaks never before witnessed in Palestinian history. Moderates are increasingly marginalized. Ahmed Youssef is no longer Haniyeh's most trusted adviser. A few months after Hamas' coup in Gaza, he asked "If one is chased away from European airports, as has happened to some of our ministers, how can one think that our positions might be strengthened?"²⁷⁴ Ghazi Hamad resigned from his post as spokesperson immediately after the 2007 coup, and one has to ask whether it is merely a coincidence that at the same time a letter appears on the internet which he has never disowned, a long letter which describes not only the reasons for his membership in the Islamist movement – a membership now spanning twenty-five years – but also where and how Hamas had made mistakes. Hamas, he says, ultimately lacked "a clear strategic vision that will combine resistance with political work and a flexible ability in tactics and political maneuvering".²⁷⁵ Rigid positions, empty slogans, and the easy refuge in an ideology which stated that 'resistance is our strategic positions': according to the letter, all of these were mistakes which did not take into account the fact that "resistance is a tool, not a strategy".²⁷⁶

Time itself has shown just how much the situation was undergoing some deep changes. For the entire first year since its seizing power in Gaza, since June 2007, Hamas had kept behaving as though it thought that its administration of Gaza was only temporary. Sooner or later, an agreement would be reached with Fatah, and a unified Palestinian National Authority would have returned to both Gaza and the West Bank, overcoming geographical, political and sectarian divisions. In the summer of 2008, that is after a full year in power, the situation patently changes. Hamas no longer merely administrates daily life, bureaucracy, and the constant emergency which is the result of the total embargo which Israel continues to pursue. The change in the significance of the Islamist movement's role in power comes from a truce between Hamas and the government in Tel Aviv itself, dating to June 19th. The agreement reaches two objectives: first, it confers upon Hamas a *de facto* recognition by Israel, which bypasses Abu Mazen's PNA and negotiates with its adversary – the Islamist movement – directly. Secondly, in a phrase often heard among the people in Gaza, Hamas reinforces its power

²⁷⁴ Author's interview with Ahmed Youssef, Gaza City, November 6th, 2007.

²⁷⁵ Citations are from a letter supposedly written by Ghazi Hamad after he stepped down from his post as the spokesperson of the national unity government, due to his opposition to the Hamas' coup in Gaza. The letter widely circulated at the time on different websites.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

‘only’ within the Strip. Although it might appear paradoxical since administering the Strip means having to deal with the desperation of over one and a half million people trapped in a massive prison on a daily basis, but the status quo which the *tahdiy’ah*, or ‘calm’, agreed with Israel involves, combined with the clash with Fatah and the PNA in Ramallah, crystallize the independence of that small slice of the planet, and thus also of those who administer it. The signs that this is the case are clear enough in Gaza’s daily life, but this change is exemplified by the first change which occurs in the fall of 2008 on the Strip’s doorstep, the last time that the Israeli authorities allowed me to cross the border at Erez, less than two months before they launched Operation Cast Lead which began on December 27th, 2008. After passing through the long reinforced concrete corridor, after the hundreds of yards of red dirt, among the skeletons of the buildings destroyed by Israeli artillery and the agricultural fields of Beit Hanoun hugging the wall marking the border, and a further half a mile on, there was a container hidden from the view of Tsahal’s soldiers. Inside it there were a desk, a computer, and a man one supposed had been sent there by the *de facto* government who presented me with a form which those entering had to fill in. Nothing much, the typical form one fills in upon crossing a border and entering a foreign state. Except that Gaza is not a state, and neither is the West Bank, much less (still) is Palestine within the borders of the 1949 armistice. That container and those forms, over a year after the June 2007 coup, are the mark that time had changed things. Setting the crisis in stone.

Epilogue

“The truce is convenient only for Hamas’ leaders”.

We were walking through the center of Gaza City, in front of the barracks which the military wing of the Islamist movement had taken over in a few hours in June 2007. Ahmed was looking at the building painted a surprising turquoise, guarded by a few armed militants. He comes from a *fatahwi* family through and through: his father had returned with the legendary Force 17, he stayed loyal to Yasser Arafat, but had then retired from politics, let down. Ahmed, a young man of little more than 25, had only known Egypt. It was the end of October of 2008, the last time the Israeli authorities allowed me and the other foreign journalists accredited in Jerusalem into Gaza before operation Cast Lead. For over a month and a half, we had had to abstain from describing what was happening in the Strip, on the eve of the most important military attack by Tsahal on a Palestinian territory after 1967 Six-Day war. I was one of the last to walk along the streets, their tarmac consumed, jacarandas to one side, recalling Egypt’s proximity. The truce held, no one had yet broken it, no Qassam rocket had been fired on Israeli cities in the Negev. And yet Gaza had been closed off from all sides: from the North, from the East, from the South sealed by Gazans’ Egyptian brothers, and from the sea where, if one took a good look, one might see the Israeli navy to blockade fishermen’s boats in Gaza City’s minuscule port.

What made it through – I’m not talking about weapons, but of what made it to the people on the street, food, medicine, cows, sheep, mobile phones, clothes – passed through the hundreds of tunnels the digging of which the Egyptians had not stopped in order to prevent the humanitarian crisis, the crisis in food supplies and the social crisis Gaza was experiencing from spilling over into Egypt. And spill over it did, on January 23rd, 2008, for example, when the iron wall at Rafah blew up – and in all likelihood it was Hamas itself who blew it up – and hundreds of thousands of Gazans poured onto the streets of the Egyptian town of Al-Arish, in the Sinai, to breathe a little free air, only to later return to their open-air prison. It was the poorest of the poor who worked in the hundreds of tunnels. And in Gaza, that means the extremely poor: for one hundred and fifty shekels, barely forty dollars, they would go through the tunnel and back. One or two would die every single day. But those who survived would help their families get by. The shelves of Gaza’s small shops were a catalog of what made it through: snacks, pasta, canned tuna, legumes, crisps, biscuits, detergents. For those who could afford them, of course. For those who couldn’t, even Rafah which had become a large open-air market remained an unattainable dream. And that meant the hundreds of thousands of people living in the refugee camps.

The truce is convenient for Hamas leaders, as Ahmed was saying, a secular young man, typical gelled-over hair, a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and a v-necked pullover. “What do we get in exchange for the truce? We keep dying in here, in this prison, while Hamas’ power grows”. Indeed, ever since June 19th, 2008, the day on which the truce between Israel and Hamas was reached, the Gaza Strip had remained isolated, under the embargo, with the taps of international food aid and of electricity supplies constantly subject to hiccups. The situation hadn’t changed much from June 2007, when the Islamist

movement had taken complete control of the Strip and Israel had declared it an “enemy entity”. The closure was total, but it was not too different from what had happened after Hamas had reached power democratically and transparently first in the Palestinian parliament, and then in government. Hamas must have sensed the criticism coming from the likes of Ahmed the secularist and from the Gazan people when, in the autumn of 2008, it faced the choice between “being roasted on a slow heat or go for broke” in a direct confrontation with the Israelis.

Eyad Sarraj, the greatest Palestinian psychiatrist and the best-known internationally, has a beautiful home in Gaza City, a house bursting secularism and Egyptian influences from every pore. While outside the rain was pouring down, flooding the plush garden, Sarraj told me: “They are closer to the people, they have a network of people who listen to what the community thinks”. In the meantime, the rain had the Strip’s refugee camps on their knees: the fragile electrical network, already feeling the strain after two and a half years of increasingly complete isolation, had again gone offline during the morning, just like two days before, prompting Ahmed Youssef to say, from his Spartan office adorned only by a photograph of Yasser Arafat, one of Abu Mazen, and by a Palestinian flag, that he “would never have expected that his land could become like Somalia”. It was the fragmentation of the “social fabric” that worried one of Hamas’ most moderate leaders: the increasingly clear-cut division between *fatahwi* and *hamsawi*, Fatah supporters and Hamas supporters. This division ran through more than just cities, districts or even city blocks, but split even – indeed, especially – individual families. As Youssef put it, “You don’t even go to weddings or funerals anymore, if you belong to the opposite faction”. He himself had had direct experience of what he described barely a week before.

This situation could not last. Hamas could not renew its truce without a new agreement on its conditions. Cynically speaking, because so little had changed for Gaza’s inhabitants after the truce, the *status quo* would have jeopardized Hamas’ internal consensus. Of course, there was internal security, no more running battles on the streets between Hamas and Fatah militants like in 2006 and 2007. Indeed, some clans, some of the largest and most powerful families who controlled parts of the territory, had been cut down to size, including the family which had kidnapped British journalist Alan Johnston, who had been freed in a blitz which Hamas itself had carried out after seizing power. One could walk the streets of Gaza freely, unlike the time when opposite factions would kidnap journalists and use them as bargaining chips. At sunset, while the imam sounded the call to the dusk prayer, I was walking alone along the sidewalks, met by little more than slightly curious glances. But as for the rest – electricity, food, or children’s clothes – not much had changed. Fuel prices had dropped, that much was true, mostly thanks to the tunnels through which Egyptian diesel oil arrived: prices had crumbled, from three hundred shekel the gallon to roughly thirty, from eighty dollars to eight. But in terms of salaries in Gaza those nine dollars remained an unattainable goal, and for those families who could afford it, that fuel had to be used to cook, heat, wash, power the electricity generator, and so on. But how about all the others, the unemployed for example, who represented the majority of Gaza’s Palestinians? That *tahdi’ah* hadn’t even saved Hamas or Islamic Jihad militants from death or prison, struck down as they had been by Israeli targeted assassinations and swept up by the Palestinian police’s round-ups. Whom did the truce help? How did it help?

While I was pondering what the Strip's Palestinians had told me – one of the fortunate few who had been able to leave Gaza – news came that the truce had been broken. On November 4th, a month and a half before its 'natural' term, Israeli tanks had penetrated a few hundred meters into the Strip under cover from the Israeli air force. The official explanation was that they had the objective of destroying a tunnel which they believed was used in the attempt to capture Tsahal soldiers. The result of the military incursion was six Hamas militants killed. The reaction from Hamas' military wing was not long coming: dozens of rockets were fired against Israeli cities in the Negev. The drums of war had already begun beating well before the ceasefire – the *tahdi'ah*, or calm – was due to expire on December 19th, well before Hamas would refuse to sign it at the very same conditions. By then, in less than one day, just short of a hundred Qassam rockets had fallen across Gaza's border and onto the kibbutz and towns in the Negev and north towards Ashkelon.

Walking along Gaza's streets today isn't what it used to be. After the bombings which came with Operation Cast Lead, Gaza itself isn't what it used to be. According to the first cautious estimates, Operation Cast Lead caused around two billion dollars' worth in damages. Four thousand buildings destroyed, sixteen thousand damaged. Not to mention a side effect which no one thought possible in Gaza, after the deep divisions between Hamas and Fatah supporters. The flags which speak of political allegiances, 'those' flags, flew together once again. There was a time in Gaza in which those flags were flown to prove that Gaza could never be controlled entirely by a single force, whether Fatah or Hamas. They flew from rooftops, from balconies, or from the roofs of ramshackle huts along the seafront just as they did on military maps. On one roof, a yellow Fatah flag near the satellite dish. On the neighboring building, a Popular Front flag. A little further along the black banner of Islamic Jihad, and then a the green of the currently dominant group, Hamas. And then, in 2008, the time came when Hamas consolidated its grip on power, a time in which flags grew increasingly worn, a time in which even the material for flags was in short supply. The only exception was the green of Hamas' own banners. Then there came a time during which flags became banners under which only a movement's own militants could stand, excluding all others, all adversaries, utterly, including private events such as weddings or funerals. And then there came the time of Operation Cast Lead's bombardments, the time under Israeli raids, when flags flew together once more. Flags were flown alongside one another at funeral processions, processions which were reserved for men, in line with a tradition which is not purely Islamic. They came together once more to cover the bodies of the victims, all lined up next to each other, large adult bodies and the small bodies of children. Hamas' green banners next to Fatah's yellow.

Perhaps this was indeed merely a reconciliation in grief, and with time politics divided Palestinian society once again, returning flags to the territory under each faction's political control to the exclusion of all others, as in a macabre game of Risk. It happened again: flags stake out each faction's geographies of politics and of power. Nevertheless, what happened in Gaza changed everything. What took place there is not only nor even primarily simply another violent event like the tens of others which demarcate a history made of bereavements, of the dead, and of blood, a history which goes back decades, as long as the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has existed. This event marks a watershed in this long and tragic war. There will be a before and an

after Gaza. For everyone. For Israel, so aptly described by David Grossman, one of Israel's and the world's greatest authors, who said that it should understand "that the war in Gaza has not healed the spot that so badly needs a cure, but only further exposed the tragic and never-ending mistakes we have made in navigating our way".¹ The war was also a watershed for Palestinians as a whole. For Hamas, of course. There is a history of Hamas which purely symbolically begins in Gaza in 1987 and equally symbolically stretches until the Twenty-Two Days' War, until Operation Cast Lead. And then there is a history of Hamas which begins from the day in which the unilateral truces come into force, proclaimed first by Israel and then by the Islamist movement, and which marked the end of the first, extremely painful round of the clash between the Jewish state and Hamas during 2009. The first part of this history had begun in 1987, with the entry of Islamist groups into the Palestinian 'resistance', and which ended with their successful bid for power, for parliamentary representation, and then for their control of Gaza.

Swords into Governments

Over twenty years of Hamas' history are marked by the Uprising of the Stones, by the Oslo Process, by the violent phase of terrorism, by Yasser Arafat's death and by the Israeli assassination of shaykh Ahmed Yassin, and finally by Hamas' decision to take part in the political process through its participation in the 2006 general elections. From pebbles to power, one might say, from terrorist attacks to ministries: this is the history which I have attempted to trace, without forgetting that these two decades take place within a context, the historical trajectory of political Islam and specifically of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, a trajectory the roots of which are not two decades old, nor even do they date to the Seventies, with the establishment of Ahmed Yassin's *Mujamma al-Islami*. This is a story the local roots of which reach deep, over sixty years ago, dating back to the late Twenties with the establishment of Hassan al-Banna's *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* in 1928.

One should not dwell upon dates merely to recall the long life of the Muslim Brotherhood which spread from Egypt into a number of Arab countries, making it the most important Islamist movement in the Middle East and North Africa. Dates only acquire meaning if they indicate a historical trajectory, and this historical trajectory begins precisely when Egypt was undergoing its most interesting and vibrant period in the construction of its modernity. It evolved side by side with the sea-changes which the Arab world has witnessed over the last eighty years: colonialism and decolonization, nationalism and pan-Arabism, the establishment of Israel and the origins of the Palestinian Question, the failure of Nasserism and the exponential growth of Islamism, the return of Western (military) power to Arab lands, and the (endogenous) transition towards democracy.

Along this path there must be a special chapter for the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, special not least because Islamists themselves consider it to be special, a *Sonderweg* which derives its specificity from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the Ikhwan which thanks to Hassan al-Banna's followers had spread to Gaza, Jerusalem and Hebron

¹ David Grossman, "Gaza success proves Israel is strong, not right", in *Haaretz*, January 20th 2009. Available online at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1056955.html>

was not the product of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but thanks to that conflict's history it took on particular characteristics, which set it apart from all the other national incarnations of the Brotherhood. In 2007, one of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's most prominent leaders, Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh explained Hamas' specificity to me in terms which were as simple as they were disarming: "Hamas is the only movement which traces its roots to the Ikhwan which has used violence. Nor could it be otherwise: Hamas must face an occupation. All the other national movements of the Muslim Brotherhood chose non-violence decades ago".²

It is precisely this inescapable genealogy, the ideological and programmatic link between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood family, which makes the interpretation according to which the Palestinian Islamist movement is nothing but a terrorist organization so utterly simplistic. This is the perspective which is (erroneously) supported by a sizeable slice of published works on Hamas. And yet a fuller reading of the history which includes Hamas, the *Mujamma al-Islami* and the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood tells a much broader story.

This story tells us, for example, that the terrorist period – the one marked by suicide attacks within Israel's borders – is not born along with Hamas in 1987, but comes at a very specific moment in the history of the fundamentalist movement. Before 1994 and after 2005 the political and strategic behavior of the Islamic Resistance Movement was different. Before this period, Hamas even had to scramble to make up its nationalist credentials and its 'credibility' with respect to other factions, such as Fatah or the Popular Front, which had for years committed themselves to armed struggle against the Israelis as a way of fighting against the occupation. The socio-religious movement of which Hamas is a splinter had different priorities. Not a politicking politics, nor resistance to the occupation, but rather something more radical still: the formation of the good Palestinian Muslim. The pillar of the *Mujamma al-Islami* – the result of an initiative taken by shaykh Ahmed Yassin in the same year as the Yom Kippur War – was the need for Palestinian society to return to Islam, because it was the abandonment of the straight path of a conscious and rigorous adherence to the faith in daily life which had been the cause of the desperate situation Palestine found itself in, having once again become an occupied land. It was necessary to build a new society, its ethical foundations, its religious creed, its traditional and conservative values. And in order to do this, it was necessary to tackle the questions central to social stability: the family, health, emancipation from poverty, care of the young, and the re-establishment of a woman's traditional role.

The Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood's fundamentalist message thus reaches the heart of Gazan society without any connection to the occupation. At different times and to different extents, this also happens in the West Bank. This despite the fact that it is precisely the occupation which ultimately determines who the Brotherhood's constituencies are, as well as ultimately the Mujamma's and Hamas': the refugee camps which changed the face of the Gaza Strip tripling its population in the space of a few days, and the poor West Bank villages which no longer have any connection with pre-1948 Palestinian cities. Paradoxically, it was precisely their other counterpart in this conflict, Israel, which would give the Ikhwan the possibility to grow and develop: analogously to Sadat in Egypt against the socialists, they adopted a precise strategy which viewed Islamists as a force to pit against nationalists.

² Author's interview with Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh, Cairo, November 28th, 2007.

It is in this context that the Islamist movement's leadership is born, takes shape, and is strengthened. These leaders today are between forty-five and fifty-five, and have been at the forefront of the last five years of Palestinian history. This generation reflects the history and lifework of a man – shaykh Ahmed Yassin – but it also reflects the cultural context which these leaders have been brought up in. Particularly universities. On the one hand there were the Palestinian universities established after 1967 which became the first terrain in which the middle aged leaders of today matured into an entirely home-grown elite. On the other hand, there were also other Arab universities, in Cairo and Alexandria, Damascus and Beirut, in ferment throughout the Seventies and riven by the campus clashes between secularists and Islamists. Thus, although the leadership of the 'professors' – their nickname deriving from the fact that most have considerable academic credentials – is therefore the result of a political and cultural history which goes beyond the confines of Palestine and is in this sense fully Arab, at the same time the political commitments of the Islamist leadership which emerged in the West Bank and in Gaza have always been resolutely national, not pan-Islamic. The Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood were certainly far from guerrilla warfare and from the *fedayeen*, for years they certainly concentrated their efforts on a social network thanks to the licenses they obtained from the Israeli authorities to operate inside schools, universities and hospitals. And yet all of this was done within a Palestinian framework. This national horizon, combined with their roots within society, explain the reason for which Hamas has become part of contemporary Palestinian history, and not simply part of the conflict with Israel. This much can be inferred from Israel's own military-style campaigns aimed at eradicating the Islamist movement: from deportations between the Eighties and Nineties, to the long line of targeted assassinations after 9/11. The snake however, did not die after it was decapitated. Indeed, it rose from its ashes yet again, demonstrating not only an unexpected organizational vitality, but also a pragmatic ability to change its strategy.

Between 2005 and 2006, after Yasser Arafat's death, Hamas decides upon a clean break in its political direction. Just as it had in 1987, the youngest among the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood's leadership had forced the previous generation to accept the birth of an operational organization such as Hamas. In 2005, Hamas decides upon a unilateral suspension of suicide attacks inside Israel, and commit to entering the political mainstream. Notwithstanding the extremely harsh blows dealt to its leadership – the assassination of its spiritual leader shaykh Ahmed Yassin first, and of his political heir Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi later – Hamas yet again demonstrates an ability to interpret the mood of its constituencies which is far superior to that shown by other political movements, such as Fatah for example. This much is confirmed by the historical record itself, namely from the majority consensus Hamas received at the municipal elections which took place in the Occupied Palestinian Territory between 2004 and 2005, as well as in the general elections of January 25th, 2006 – a consensus which was not the result of terrorist attacks carried out over previous years, but the reward for a social engagement and for a different kind of national political presence.

Far from bringing the international community a measure of relief, Hamas' shift from the use of political violence to participation on a purely participative political level places Western governments squarely before an old conundrum: mainstream Hamas in the hope of moderating it, or isolate it and bet yet again on the strengthening Fatah, the counterpart which had been chosen over the previous two decades? After a timid attempt

to open up to Hamas made by the Europeans, Israel, US and Europe decided on the second option, contributing to worsening the situation within the Occupied Palestinian Territory with the birth of two governments and two Palestines, one controlled by Hamas, the other by Fatah. The first phase of Hamas' history draws to a close with its coup in June 2007. In the space of twenty years the Islamic Resistance Movement goes from the founding charter of 1988 in which the destruction of Israel is prefigured, to the 'Hamas in a suit' of Ismail Haniyeh, the student and right hand man to shaykh Yassin who, along with the leader of the political bureau abroad Khaled Meshaal, between 2006 and 2008 repeatedly reiterated the proposal of a long-term truce with Israel lasting between ten and twenty years, as well as the recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. This step means the *de facto* – if not formal – recognition of the state of Israel within the Green Line.

There are two diametrically opposite ways of interpreting these vitally important changes in Hamas' strategy. The first, which is certainly the most popular, does not even take the Islamist movement's pragmatism into account, viewing the decision to take part in elections simply as just another instrument Hamas adopted in order to reach an unchanging objective: the destruction of the state of Israel. This is a wholly unscientific and entirely political way of arriving at a Manichean reading the last two decades of Palestinian history which is not only embedded in the present, but part and parcel of a specific choice of a 'side'. The second approach is grounded in a understanding of the complexities of the historical trajectory of a movement which has used terrorism, but that it is impossible to understand solely as a terrorist organization. Behind the dark façade of suicide attacks, of their instigators and of their 'wicked teachers'^{*}, there is also a complex welfare network and a political strategy, a moral rigor, and a politological analysis of concepts such as citizenship, common good, and public interest. Just as in other movements which hark back to their religious roots – in Europe, for example, there are ecclesiastical communities and parties which take their cue from Christianity – there is a continuous reflection upon the relationship between religion and politics, between faith and collective morality, between the government of public affairs and the need to respond to the needs of citizens.

Even within Israeli historiography itself, scholars of the caliber of Shaul Mishal – one of the most famous experts on Hamas – encounter considerable difficulties when attempting to portray the Islamist movement as a rigid organization. "Despite the horrifying toll claimed by Hamas' violence, it is essentially a social and political movement, providing extensive community services and responding constantly to political reality through bargaining and power brokering. Along this line, it has been reluctant to adhere to its religious dogma at any price and so has tended to adopt political strategies that minimize the danger of rigidly adhering to principle, doctrine, or ideology, ready to respond or adjust to fluid conditions without losing sight of ultimate objectives."³ Henry Siegman goes further. An expert in Middle Eastern politics born in

^{*} *Translator's note:* the term 'wicked teachers' (*cattivi maestri*) was used to describe university professors such as Toni Negri (author, with Michael Hardt, of the best-selling *Empire*) who were accused in the Seventies of stoking radicalism in left-wing Italian youth and of being the intellectuals who provided the ideological legitimization of left-wing terrorism.

³ Shaul Mishal, "The Pragmatic Dimension of the Palestinian Hamas", *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 29, n. 4, summer 2003, p. 570.

Germany in 1930 and who escaped anti-Jewish persecution in 1933 first in the Netherlands and then in the USA, Siegman was president of the American Jewish Congress for sixteen years. In an article published on the *London Review of Books* in late January 2009, he states that “it is too easy to describe Hamas simply as a ‘terror organization’. It is a religious nationalist movement that resorts to terrorism, as the Zionist movement did during its struggle for statehood, in the mistaken belief that it is the only way to end an oppressive occupation and bring about a Palestinian state. While Hamas’ ideology formally calls for that state to be established on the ruins of the state of Israel, this doesn’t determine Hamas’ actual policies today any more than the same declaration in the PLO charter determined Fatah’s actions”.⁴

Although such a ‘normal’ interpretation of Hamas’ political dimension might appear surreal – particularly so soon after Operation Cast Lead, and the long list of the dead and wounded in Gaza – one of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s hallmarks are precisely its paradoxes. Thus it is possible to talk of political choices, strategies, and electoral manifestos within the Palestinian Territory as though one were speaking of the domestic politics of a state, rather than an entity which lacks form and borders. Putting the conflict aside for a moment, so to speak, it is possible to study Hamas as a political movement, made not just of structures but of ideas, programs, perspectives, and thereby provide a three-dimensional picture of an important piece of Palestinian history, and rejecting the all-too-often one-dimensional representations of events in the Middle East. This sophistication is one of the possible instruments which can also help understand the last two events which have marked Hamas’ history between 2007 and 2009. The first is the seizing of power in Gaza in June 2007, which occurred primarily under the impulse of its military wing, which has partially marginalized or at any rate diminished the influence of the local political wing. The second event, a year and a half later, is the showdown between Hamas and Israel, which saw Israel’s harshest military intervention on Palestinian territory in the history of the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Road Ahead

There is a single, basic question in the latest chapter of Hamas’ history: why did the Islamist movement not make the final jump from ‘resistance’ to ‘politics’? Given the context, namely a conflict with the Israelis which is still ongoing, the question immediately appears arduous to answer in and of itself. For a movement which since its inception contains ‘resistance’ in its very name, it is difficult for this component to be entirely erased if the initial conditions which brought it about remain. These conditions are: the continued occupation of the West Bank, and a unilateral withdrawal undertaken by Ariel Sharon in 2005 which ‘liberated’ Gaza but fenced it in inside a military perimeter. This is a debate which is entirely internal to the political wing and which does not concern the military wing, although the military wing itself has indirectly influenced the discussion by means of violent acts which have changed the very direction of Palestinian history after 2006. Between 1995 and 1996 a first window of opportunity had opened, when the attempt was made to resolve the debate between ‘resistance’ and

⁴ Henry Siegman, “Israel’s Lies”, in *London Review of Books*, 29 January 2009, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n02/sieg01_.html

'politics' by means of a distinction between Hamas as a 'resistance' movement and a fully fledged political party emerging from Hamas proper: Al-Khalas. This experiment lasted barely more than three years, and was ultimately aborted because the 'mother-ship' did not manage to give the new organization the autonomy it needed for Palestinian Islamism to be conceived of as were other movements which had a national question at their core, such as in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country. Distinguishing between Hamas the movement and Al-Khalas as a political party would have differentiated lines of responsibility, and it would have forced politicians to undertake a different path within the embryonic Palestinian national institutions. Ghazi Hamad, who took part in that experiment, has said that Hamas was not yet mature enough. And history certainly isn't built on ifs and buts.

It was necessary to pass through the most violent and bloody chapter in the recent history of the conflict – the Second Intifada – before Hamas resolved to open a new window of opportunity and again discuss the passage from resistance to politics. This possibility is extensively documented from witnesses within the Islamist movement, who describe in detail the internal consultation concerning the decision on whether or not to take part in the January 2006 general elections. The formal entry into the Palestinian National Authority is equally well documented. Nothing, however, transpires concerning suicide attacks, which are stopped with a unilateral truce in January 2005, save the entirely local case of an attack in Dimona, inside Israel, in February 2008. Thus, there is a very specific picture missing in this sequence: the one relating to a political decision taken by Hamas on suicide attacks. There is no confirmation by Hamas leaders, there is no trace of a decision on an topic which is considered a taboo amongst Islamists, at least in their interactions with outside interlocutors. And yet it is possible to put forward the hypothesis that a specific line was taken with regard to suicide attacks, namely that the political wing consulted its four 'constituencies' in order to decide whether or not to continue with suicide attacks. Only the existence of a specific political decision on the matter can explain why in almost five years since that unilateral truce the military wing has not launched a single suicide attack. As though the mandate – so to speak – to Hamas' armed factions no longer included suicide attacks. Of course, this does not mean that there were no more indiscriminate attacks targeting civilians, as indeed happened through the launch of thousands of home-made rockets – the Qassams – from the Gaza Strip. But these rocket launches differ from suicide attacks in two key respects: firstly, because they thankfully do not have the devastating firepower of kamikaze attacks spreading fear and death into the very hearts of Israeli cities; and secondly, suicide attacks are closer to a conception of armed confrontation which is typical of guerrilla warfare. In a way, this choice appears to suggest that Hamas 'militarized', so to speak. It is precisely this militarization which leaves the transition from 'resistance' to politics unfinished, leaving unresolved the confusion which surrounds Hamas, and which continues to subsume armed factions and political wings, Qassams and participation in government, under a single roof.

Of course, one cannot abstract the context of internal dynamics from what happens externally, and it is certain that the positions adopted ever since 2006 by all international actors, both regional and international, from Israel to Arab countries, from the United States to the European Union, affected Hamas' (in)ability to complete that process of 'de-radicalization' which had been demanded of it. The intransigence, the

isolation, the embargo, the marginalization, the presence of preconditions before consenting to any contact whatsoever with the international community were crucial in reducing the influence of moderates – or at least of pragmatists – within the Palestinian Islamist movement. In this sense, a highly debatable page of the history of diplomacy, of media information, and of politics – and not just Middle Eastern politics, but European, Western and American politics as well – has been written. Those all too real opportunities of moderating Hamas positions, of enclosing them within a framework which would place (armed) radicals in a position from which they could no longer damage the process were consciously avoided. The result has been that those voices within Hamas which were more willing to dialog have themselves been isolated in favor of the hawks, Said Siyyam above all – the very same who established the Executive Force in the first place.

The condition in which Palestinian politics as a whole finds itself today – namely an existence with a very limited degree of sovereignty – and particularly the impact of Hamas' decision to enter into the PNA framework cannot be explained without understanding the role played by the corridors of power in Ramallah as in Gaza City as well as the influence of a complex civil society. There is a responsibility which is entirely Hamas' linked to its decision after the surprising electoral victory on January 25th, 2006, not to completely commit to the institutions of the PNA. This decision was to partake of legislative power by entering Parliament, but not to sully their hands with executive power. This halfway house is immediately swept away by the result of the elections, thus forcing Hamas to put itself completely on the line. Palestinian Islamists' proverbial lack of flexibility was the root cause of the failure of a possible coalition government in the spring of 2006, resulting in the Hamas-only government lead by Ismail Haniyeh. Hamas' four-dimensional way of moving, its inability to negotiate politics' inevitable compromises, however, cannot save Fatah from its own responsibilities: the party which had administered the PNA for the previous eleven years to the point of becoming one with the state itself. Fatah's equally inflexible inability to share power, its inability to reform itself and to go to the root of the problems which had caused its electoral defeat represent the other root cause of the darkest chapter in Palestinian politics, the chapter of internal conflict, of a civil war which was hidden at first and then exploded onto the streets of Gaza in the spring and summer of 2007. Palestinian politics submitted to its international patrons, and while Hamas – despite being supported by Syria and Iran, while being the puppet of neither – maintained a national perspective, in the perception of Palestinians on the streets, Fatah slowly but surely came to echo the political objectives of others. This perception has weakened not just Fatah, but most importantly the very institutions of the PNA, first and foremost Mahmoud Abbas' Presidency.

The split between Fatah and Hamas, between West Bank and Gaza, has without a doubt diminished the national dimension of the Palestinian Question. The plans set out on the desks of certain administrations, those which plan for the establishment of two separate entities – Gaza and the West Bank – increasingly linked to would-be patrons such as Egypt and Jordan, are the result of this split. A split, a clash, a fracture which are not simply the result of internal Palestinian politics, but that have been stoked and sustained from the outside, as has become clear concerning the events of 2006 and 2007. Such a strong presence of international actors within domestic Palestinian politics has done nothing but worsen existing problems rather than help resolve them, and if anything

has forced those same international actors to go back to ‘square one’, because the military option, whether internal to the Palestinian context or external to it, has not produced a definitive result. On the contrary. Not even Operation Cast Lead resolved the issues for which the Israeli military and political establishments decided to launch the war in the first place: Hamas has not been destroyed, the Qassam rocket launches continued up until a few hours before the truce of January 18th, and the Palestinian population has not revolted against Hamas, nor has the war changed the balance of power in Gaza City. In addition to which, Egypt has yet again clearly stated that it has no intention of administering the Strip in some sort of new protectorate. Moreover, Operation Cast Lead did not make it possible for Mahmoud Abbas to regain his position in Gaza City as president of all Palestinians, and has if anything made his domestic and international image even more fragile.

What, instead, happened to Hamas after the twenty-two terrible days of war between 2008 and 2009? Looking simply at facts on the ground, the Islamist movement has lost one of its hawks, Said Siyyam, killed in one of the last bombardments on Gaza City, a bombardment very similar in style to the one used to kill Salah Shehadeh, who had founded the movement’s military wing. Hamas, however, has already demonstrated throughout its history that it manages to replace its leaders – in the sights of Israelis’ targeted assassinations as they are – very quickly. The two crucial questions are rather about Hamas’ internal equilibria and about its popular consensus. On its knees as a consequence of the thousands of militants arrested in the West Bank not just by the Israelis but most especially by the security forces loyal to Abu Mazen’s PNA, Hamas increasingly finds in Gaza its stronghold. But Hamas does not mean just Gaza: it is still present in its four *constituencies* and in the popular consensus which it benefits from. If, therefore, the leadership inside the Strip is crucial for the Islamist movement’s internal equilibria and for its negotiations with international actors, the real question concerns its ability to retain popular support. There are two possibilities in this sense, which at first might appear contradictory. The first is that Hamas has been weakened because a part of the population – and not just in Gaza – considers it partly responsible for the humanitarian disaster. The second is that Hamas has, on the contrary, been strengthened because in the Arab collective conscience the result of the Gaza War was favorable to Hamas – as had happened in Hizbullah’s case after the war with Israel in the summer of 2006. In that case, Hizbullah’s profile in Lebanon and in Arab public opinion were not diminished as a result of the extensive and indiscriminate destruction, the high number of dead and of civilian victims. The same might happen with Hamas.

And yet, the hallmark of Hamas’ life after Operation Cast Lead has been the simultaneous presence of both these elements. On the one hand, Hamas came out weakened from the war, because in its history “serving the people” has always been central, inescapable: thus, the movement’s inability to defend the people is one of the factors in the Islamist movement’s newfound weakness. At the same time, however, the war brought Hamas back center-stage in Middle Eastern politics after a year and a half of near-total isolation, including from Arab states – an isolation which was broken once Khaled Meshaal turned up in Doha to take part in an alternative meeting among Arab states hosted by Qatar. In this sense, the Gaza War had the power of deeply dividing the Arab world, of placing – at least as far as regional public opinion was concerned – Egypt in the dock, accused of having essentially given the Israeli government the go-ahead for

the Operation, and of bringing Hamas back into the picture by force. Hamas' renewed presence on the Middle East's political and diplomatic scene reinforces the hypothesis that the Islamist movement cannot go back on the choices made over the past five years and which have in any case shifted its internal center of gravity towards politics, despite the violent aftershocks experienced during 2007 after the coup in Gaza. If on the one hand it is highly likely – indeed, unavoidable – that the consequence of Operation Cast Lead will in the short term be a strengthening of the more militant and radical fringes, it is equally possible that the consequences over the medium to longer term might move in the opposite direction. The seeds of this political trajectory could already be detected immediately after the unilateral truces which put an end to the Israeli military operation in Gaza. Hamas was quick to adhere to the ceasefire decided upon by Israel on the even of the swearing in of the new American President, Barack Obama, because the military option alone would have done nothing but weaken the Palestinian Islamist movement in terms of its internal consensus, its popular support. This is the reason why barely a few days after the ceasefire had entered into force, Hamas re-started its provision of welfare services, and the distribution of compensation for those who had had their houses destroyed or damaged. On top of which the fact that representatives from the pragmatic current – Salah al-Bardawil, to name but one – seems to signal that Hamas' political wing was attempting to make up for the ground it had lost after June 2007 and the movement's taking power in Gaza.

These are only two signals in a chapter in Hamas' history which begins after the Gaza tragedy and which still remains to be written. They are two signals that will on the other hand see much anger, a return to arms, and the opposition of armed groups within the Strip to any possibility of negotiations. Not to mention the desperate choice of so many among young and very young Palestinians who before Gaza's rubble answered those who asked them what they would do after the bombings stopped with a single word: *muqawwama*, resistance. And yet, if radicalization is an unfortunately foregone conclusion of each and every new spark in the close-quarter struggle which is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one cannot therefore conclude that the Islamist movement will be involved in, or better overwhelmed by that same knee-jerk reaction.

In sum, those who argue that radical movements in crisis zones, those who have built into their very birth the dualism between resistance and politics, between revolution and politics cannot but enter – whether sooner or later – the framework of negotiations, in the context of a sustainable dialog with institutions. It has happened in Northern Ireland, where the complete transition into politics of the Sinn Fein-IRA pairing did not travel a simple path: despite the passage of time softening the tones of that history, in truth much remains of that history, not was it free of obstacles which at the time appeared insurmountable. It happened, in other words, in the heart of Europe, a continent which on the whole had been peaceful. It also happened in decidedly more complex contexts, such as in Africa: from the pathway towards power traced by the ANC in South Africa, to the co-optation of the Mozambique resistance movement RENAMO, through the negotiations lead by Vatican-backed ecclesiastical Community of Sant'Egidio, when weapons were still doing the talking and the question of recognizing RENAMO was a taboo for some governments.

The complete transition towards politics of a movement which uses violence and resorts to terrorism never follows a straight line, nor is without phases which witness

returns to armed struggle. The definitive jump across the chasm is the responsibility first and foremost of those who made that choice themselves, but the context within which that choice is made is never irrelevant, and in this case this means the conflict itself. Nor is the influence of those who are already present at the scene, around the parties directly involved, inconsequential. There are different approaches within the Arab world, within the Middle East more broadly conceived, within the European Union, which to this day remains ambiguous about its ability to act independently within Mediterranean politics, and finally the United States, which come to the region under a new sign and with what the new image Obama brings.

The last few years of Hamas' life have, in other words, shown that the debate over the possibility of taking part in the political process has been far too intense and protracted to be considered merely a passing phase. Access to power has changed something within Hamas, although it is not yet possible to discern exactly how much has changed, in what terms, or for how long. The Islamist movement's history cannot be cut out and pasted onto Gaza like a sticker, as though the Strip were somehow the place within which Hamas' existence is confined. The Islamist movement's history takes place as much in the West Bank as it does in Gaza, and it is for this reason that one cannot separate it from a process which is still ongoing in Palestinian politics, namely the post-Arafat transition and the emergence onto the institutional scene of elites which are different from those that had administered the Oslo process. Those elites are focused on an entirely national horizon, where by 'national' one should understand Palestine within the Green Line, including the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Such a national horizon might appear at odds with the presence in Damascus of a leadership so influential on its counterparts within the Occupied Territory and so deeply connected with the world of those refugees who fled in 1948 and in 1967. And yet, even that leadership abroad bases its national perspective on that Palestine carved out by the PNA, taking it as an established matter of fact, with all that this entails in terms of political objectives. It is this Palestine the PNA represents which Hamas' leadership cannot do without. Nor disregard.

Dramatis Personae

Sources: Aside from personal accounts provided by interviewees and from official sources, much information was gleaned from *Palestinian Personalities – A Biographical Dictionary*, edited by Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Palestinian Academy Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), Jerusalem 2006.

MAHMOUD ABBAS, *nom de guerre* Abu Mazen (Safed 1935) President of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) since January 9th, 2005, he did not resign at the end of his four-year mandate and retained his position as head of the PNA in addition to his position as leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Having become a refugee in 1948 in Syria, he was one of Fatah's founders and a member of its Central Committee since 1964. He holds a doctorate in history from Moscow University, and is a strong supporter of the 'two-state solution' – one Palestinian, one Israeli – since 1977. Among the protagonists of the Madrid Conference, he led the Palestinian delegation in the secret Oslo negotiations and on September 13th, 1993, he signed the Declaration of Principles along with Shimon Peres. Having returned to Palestine in 1995, after forty-seven years in exile, he has remained one of the central figures in the PNA ever since. In 2003, he became Prime Minister for barely ten months. He negotiated the first *hudna* in 2003 and the second in 2005, according to the line he pursued which attempted to co-opt Hamas into the PNA. He headed Fatah's 6th Congress in Bethlehem on August 4th 2009 and was elected as head of Fatah movement and of its Central Committee.

OMAR ABDEL RAZEQ (Salfit 1958) Abdel Razeq was returned to Parliament in the Change and Reform List in January 2006 while under administrative detention in an Israeli jail. He took up the post of Minister of Finance during the first Hamas government of March 2006, just after his release. He obtained a PhD in International Economics from the University of Iowa and taught in the US before being appointed at the Al-Najah University in Nablus. He was arrested by Israeli authorities along with other Hamas ministers and deputies after the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. Freed in August 2008, he handed himself in to Israeli authorities the following December 15th after receiving an injunction to return to prison for a further four months of detention.

YASSER ABED RABBO (Jaffa 1945) Co-founder of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) in 1968, he was expelled from the organization in 1991. He has been head of the PLO's Department of Information and Culture since 1973, he was one of Arafat's closest advisers and was part of the Palestinian delegation at the Madrid conference of 1991, as well as taking part in the secret negotiations which led to the Oslo process. A minister in various PNA governments, along with Israeli politician Yossi Beilin, Abed Rabbo was the originator of the idea for the 2003 Geneva peace initiative.

An advocate of the hard line vis-à-vis Hamas, he became one of current PNA President Mahmoud Abbas' closest advisers.

ZIAD ABU AMR (Gaza City 1950) University professor with a strong grounding in philosophy and political science, Abu Amr holds a doctorate from Georgetown University as well as having occupied a long list of positions, professorships and publications. He is a specialist in political Islam and in international relations. Minister of Culture in Mahmoud Abbas' 2003 government, he is also a member of the PLO's Central Committee, and was returned as an independent member of parliament in the January 2006 general elections. He was appointed Foreign Minister in the short-lived 2007 national unity government.

SAMIR ABU EISHEH (Nablus 1960) An engineer with a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, Abu Eisheh undertook an academic career. Abu Eisheh became President of the Engineering Faculty at the Al-Najah University in Nablus, and was later appointed Minister for Planning in the first Hamas government of 2006. On January 29th, he is arrested along with other Islamist parliamentarians and ministers, and later released after two weeks. He also becomes interim Finance Minister following the arrest of Omar Abdel Razeq, and in this role he signs an agreement for the supply of fuel to the West Bank and Gaza in October 2006 with the Israeli private company Paz, despite the economic isolation which the Haniyeh government has been subjected to. He is re-appointed Minister for Planning under the national unity government of spring 2007.

MOUSSA ABU MARZOUQ (Rafah 1951) Abu Marzouq heads Hamas' political office between 1991 and 1995, until, that is, his arrest at the hands of US authorities. He remained in a New York jail until May 1997, when Israel dropped its extradition request, whereupon he temporarily returned to Jordan. He studied engineering in Egypt, worked in the Gulf and later emigrated to the US, where he obtained a doctorate in engineering. He currently lives in Damascus, where he is Khaled Meshaal's Deputy in Hamas' political bureau. He took part in many negotiations, including the 2002 talks with Fatah and other Palestinian factions, and the truce reached with Israel in June 2008 which ended six months later. Since 2003, the US government has included him in its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

SAYYED ABU MUSAMEH (1948) Having become a member of the Muslim Brotherhood at the start of the Seventies, he studied at the University of Damascus. He is amongst Hamas' earliest adherents, and in 1989 rose to fill the post of head of the political office for a year and a half after the arrests of Ahmed Yassin and of Ismail Abu Shanab. He was himself arrested in 1992, sentenced to twelve years in prison, and freed three and a half years later in the context of a prisoner exchange. A journalist, and head of *Al Watan* newspaper, he was later arrested by PNA Security Forces in 1995, and then released. He is regarded as one of Hamas' moderates in Gaza.

JAMAL ABU SAMHADHANA (Al-Maghazi 1963 – Rafah 2006) Fatah militant ever since he was a young man, from the Eighties he undertakes a journey in exile which would take him to Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, and later in Germany to attend a military college,

and finally to Algeria and Iraq. He returns to the Palestinian Occupied Territory upon the installment of the PNA. He represents a critical voice against the PNA's repression of Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants, he leaves Fatah and establishes the Popular Resistance Committees during the Second Intifada. In this guise, in April 2006 Hamas Interior Minister Said Siyyam appoints him to the post of the Ministry's Inspector General. He is killed a few months later, on June 8th, 2006, during an Israeli raid on Rafah: he was second on the list of those sought by the authorities in Tel Aviv.

ISMAIL ABU SHANAB (Nuseirat 1950 – Gaza City 2003) A professional engineer, Abu Shanab gained a degree in Egypt in 1975 and later took on several posts within academia and civil society. Ever since its establishment, he was amongst Hamas' leaders, and for a year and a half until his arrest by Israeli authorities in 1989, he filled the post of head of the political office. Released in 1997, he was considered Hamas' most pragmatic leader, and the bridge between the Islamist movement and the PLO. He was one of the central figures in the internal Palestinian negotiations in 2002, as well as of the 2003 *hudna*. He was killed by the Israelis in a targeted assassination on August 21st, 2003, in Gaza City's Al-Rimal district.

RASHID ABU SHBAK (Jabalia 1954) One of the most important figures in the landscape of Palestinian security institutions. He becomes a Fatah member in 1971, and is arrested by the Israelis for the first time in 1972. He remains in the Israeli jails for fourteen years, from 1973 until 1987. Before leaving for Tunis, where Yasser Arafat was based at the time, he rises to the leadership of Fatah's military wing, the so-called 'Hawks'. He returns in 1994 upon the installment of the Palestinian National Authority. He is Muhammad Dahlan's deputy in the Gaza Preventive Security Force, of which he finally takes charge in 2002. From 2005 he begins a rise which will take him to the very top of the security services: first, in April 2005, Abu Mazen appoints him head the Preventive Security Force in the West Bank and Gaza; then, on February 20th, 2006, he is appointed Head of the Security Services; later, on April 6th, 2006, he is made Director General of Internal Security at the Interior Ministry. Along with his strongest rival, Muhammad Dahlan, Hamas considers him responsible for the repression against it since the mid-1990s and of the clashes between Fatah and Hamas over 2006 and 2007.

AHMED HAJ ALI (Qasiriyya-Haifa 1940) Haj Ali received a religious education in Damascus and in Nablus, residing in the nearby refugee camp of Ain Beit al-Ma'. Later, he was among those deported to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon, and has been arrested several times by the Israelis. He was in jail when elected to parliament in the Change and Reform list in January 2006, receiving a high number of preferences. He left prison in February 2006, but was re-arrested and released several times between 2006 and 2007.

YASSER ARAFAT *nom de guerre* ABU AMMAR (Cairo 1929 – Paris 2004). Arafat was co-founder of Fatah in 1957 along with Khalil al-Wazir (*aka* Abu Jihad), after having established the Union of Palestinian Students in 1956. He spends most of his childhood and adolescence in Cairo. Fatah spokesperson until 1968, the following year he becomes the President of the PLO's Executive Committee. Ever since his speech to the Palestinian National Council's Assembly in Algiers on November 15th, 1988, he undertakes the path

which would lead to the Oslo process, to the Washington Accords of 1993, and to the birth of the Palestinian National Authority the following year, of which he then becomes the first President. Arafat receives the Nobel Peace Prize, and remained the absolute protagonist of the PNA until his death in 2004. After the failure of the Camp David negotiations with Ehud Barak and the start of the Second Intifada, he is increasingly isolated by the Israeli government, to the point that under Ariel Sharon's premiership his Ramallah residence, the Muqata, is placed under siege. He dies in a military hospital on the outskirts of Paris, having been transported there via Amman. His funerals, attended by several world leaders, take place in Cairo, after which his body is taken back to Ramallah on an Egyptian helicopter, back to the Muqata where it currently rests.

FARHAT AS'AD (A-Tira, Ramallah 1968) Becomes a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in his teens, while in secondary education at A-Tira, in Ramallah. Between 1995 and 1996 he was Hamas' coordinator for all university campuses, preparing and managing elections to student councils. Between 2000 and 2003 he is Hamas' West Bank coordinator for the Second Intifada. Arrested several times by the Tel Aviv authorities, he spent one hundred months in administrative detention in Israeli jails. He was the coordinator for the electoral campaign in the run-up to the January 2006 general elections.

YOUNIS AL-ASTAL (Khan Younis, 1956) Having gained a degree in Saudi Arabia, and then a first doctorate in *fiqh* in Jordan and a second in *shari'a* jurisprudence in the Sudan, for two years he headed the Shari'a Faculty of the Islamic University in Gaza City. He was returned to Parliament in the Change and Reform list during the January 2006 general elections with nearly 40,000 votes, and is one of the best-known preachers for Aqsa TV, Hamas' television channel in the Gaza Strip.

YAHYA AYYASH (Rafat-Nablus, 1966 – Beit Lahya, 1996). After reading for an engineering degree at Birzeit University in Ramallah, he becomes a member of Hamas in the early Nineties, just as the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades are being established. He is quickly nicknamed *al-Muhandis*, 'the Engineer' or 'Engineer of Death', because it is he who prepares explosives used in many suicide attacks in 1994 and 1995. Wanted by the Israeli authorities, he is killed in an attack in the Gaza Strip on January 5th, 1996.

AHMED BAHER (Khan Younis 1950). Baher was returned to Parliament in the Change and Reform list during the January 2006 general elections, and then voted First Deputy Speaker by his peers. A member of the Muslim Brotherhood since the Seventies, he was active within shaykh Ahmed Yassin's *Mujamma al-Islami* and in several other charitable organizations. Having received a religious education, he took on several roles, amongst which that of *khatib* and of *imam* of the famous Palestine Mosque in Gaza City. He was a member of the Al-Khalas party in the mid-1990s.

SALAH AL-BARDAWIL (Khan Younis 1959) Literary critic and a specialist in Palestinian literature, he gained a doctorate from Cairo University, and for over fifteen years taught at the Islamic University in Gaza City. He founded the weekly *Al-Risala*, and was spokesperson for the Al-Khalas party from 1996 to 2000. Considered one of Hamas'

moderates, Bardawil was returned to Parliament in the Change and Reform list during the January 2006 general elections, and later became spokesperson for the parliamentary wing. He headed the Hamas delegation to Cairo in January 2009 to take part in indirect negotiations for a truce with Israel both during and after Operation Cast Lead.

SHAYKH MAJID BARGHOUTHY (Kobar 1964 – Ramallah 2008) Al-Barghouthi held the post of imam in Kobar, a village near Ramallah. Arrested by the Israelis, he had spent four years in jail, and was released in 2005 in the context of a prisoner exchange. Very well-known in the area, shaykh Majid toured surrounding villages as a preacher on behalf of the Ministry of Waqf. In February 2008 he was arrested by Palestinian intelligence, and interrogated in order to extract information on what were thought to be arms caches. According to an independent commission of inquiry, he was subjected to torture and died of a ‘heart attack’.

MARWAN BARGHOUTHY (Kobar 1959) Barghouthi becomes a Fatah member in his adolescence, and is among the founders of its youth branch, the *Shabiba*. His first arrest is dated 1978, following which he is imprisoned for five years, and upon his release becomes active in the student movement at Birzeit University in Ramallah. Deported to Jordan, he plays a fundamental role during the First Intifada as a link with the leaders inside the Territory. He becomes a member of the PLO Central Committee, and then returns to the West Bank in 1994. He is elected to the first Palestinian Parliament in 1996. As Fatah’s Secretary General in the West Bank, he becomes the best-known leader of the Second Intifada. He is arrested in Ramallah in April 2002, and sentenced to five life sentences plus another forty years with the accusation of having ordered attacks carried out by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade. He is returned to parliament for a second time in the 2006 general while still in jail. He is one of the first to sign the so-called “Prisoners’ Document” of May 2006 aiming for Palestinian reconciliation.

MUHAMMAD BARGHOUTHY (Kobar 1968) Labor Minister under the first Haniyeh government in March 2006, he later takes on the position of Minister for Local Government in the brief national unity government of March 2007. He has been arrested several times with the accusation of being a member of Hamas, and has spent five years in Israeli jails.

MUSTAPHA BARGHOUTHY (Jerusalem 1954) Mustapha Barghouthi graduates from medical school in Moscow and undertook medical practice in Jerusalem. He was a member of the Palestinian Communist Party, and later established the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees based in Ramallah. After further studies in the United States, he becomes one of the main activists in Palestinian civil society and in non-governmental organizations. Along with Haidar Abdel Shafi and academic and activist Edward Said, he is cofounder of the Palestinian National Initiative in 2002, while the Second Intifada was still in full flow. He runs as a candidate in the Palestinian Presidential elections in January 2005 after Arafat’s death. He is the mediator behind the formation of the national unity government which lasted between March and June of 2007, acting as Minister for Information in that administration. He was returned to parliament on an independent ticket in the general elections of January 25th, 2006.

SHAYKH AHMED BITAWI (Bita 1944) Shaykh Bitawi studied *shari'a* at Amman University, and has been a *shari'a* court judge for forty years, as well as *khatib* in mosques across the West Bank and at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and professor at Al-Najah University and at Al-Rawda college. He is considered one of the most conservative leaders of Hamas in the West Bank, and is president of the Union of the Ulama in Palestine, as well as acting as head of several groups, including the organizations in charge of collecting *zakat* (charity tax) in Nablus. Since 1990, Bitawi was arrested several times by the Israelis, and was among the deported at Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon. He was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood before joining Hamas, and was returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list in the January 2006 general elections.

MUHAMMAD DAHLAN (Khan Younis 1961) Dahlan began his political activity in Fatah's youth organization, the *Shabiba*. Arrested several times during the first half of the Eighties, he later became a key figure in the First Intifada in Gaza. He was expelled from the Palestinian Occupied Territory by the Israeli authorities, and remained in the PLO's headquarters in Tunis until 1994, when he returned to Gaza with Yasser Arafat. Until 2002, he headed the Preventive Security Force, masterminding the arrests of Hamas leaders and militants in the mid-Nineties. He became Arafat's National Security Councilor in 2002, and the following year was promoted to Minister for Security Affairs in Mahmoud Abbas' government, and later Minister for Civilian Affairs in Ahmed Qureya's government between 2005 and 2006. He was returned to parliament as a Fatah candidate in the general elections of January 25th, 2006, and selected to act as National Security Councilor by President Mahmoud Abbas.

MUHAMMAD AL-DEIF (Khan Younis 1965) Al-Deif is believed to be the Commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades since the killing of Salah Shehadeh in 2002. Having become a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Eighties, and later joining Hamas, he was arrested by the Israeli authorities in the first massive wave of arrest of 1989. After his release, he took part in the establishment of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades alongside Yahya Ayyash. He was arrested in 2000 by the Preventive Security Force and later freed, and currently tops the Israeli authorities' most wanted list, and has been the target of several assassination attempts by the Israelis. He is believed to have been injured, but independent sources of information on him are very scarce.

ABDEL FATTAH AL-DUKHAN (Arak al-Sweidan 1936) Al-Dukhan is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and heads the largest charitable organization in Gaza, Al-Salah, as well as one of those in attendance at the meeting at which Hamas was established on December 9th, 1987. Al-Dukhan is teacher, and is considered to have written the Hamas Charter published in August 1988. He was one of those deported to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon, and had two sons killed by the Israeli army: the first during the Second Intifada, and the second while – according to Tel Aviv's armed forces – he was placing a bomb along the border with the Gaza Strip. He was returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list in the January 2006 general elections, and is the oldest member of the second Palestinian legislature.

AZIZ DWEIK (Nablus 1948) A trained geographer, Dweik holds three Masters degrees and a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. He founded and directed Al-Najah University's Geography Department. He has been a Hamas member ever since its establishment, and was among the four hundred and fourteen prisoners deported to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon. Given his family roots in Hebron, he was returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list in January 2006 in this southern district of the West Bank, and was later elected Parliament Speaker. He was arrested by Israeli authorities on August 5th, 2006, and has since then been detained in prison between Ramallah and Jerusalem until June 2009.

QADDURA FARES (Silwad 1962) Fares is one of the most prominent among the current of so-called 'Young Turks' within Fatah. After having spent fourteen years in Israeli prisons, he was elected to the first Palestinian parliament in 1996. He was a minister without portfolio in Ahmed Qureya's administration between 2003 and 2005, and is among the signatories of the Geneva peace initiative. Defeated in the January 2006 elections, he heads the Palestinian Prisoners Society. He is considered amongst the Fatah politicians closest to Marwan Barghouthi.

MARYAM FARHAT (UMM NIDAL) (Gaza 1949) Farhat was returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list in January 2006. Known in Gaza as the "Mother of Martyrs", she has six children, and hit the international headlines when she appeared beside her seventeen year-old son in a video claiming responsibility for a suicide bombing he carried out against an Israeli settlement in the Gaza Strip. Two more of her sons were killed during the Second Intifada. In 2008, Hamas asked Egypt to allow her to pass through the Rafah crossing in order for her to receive medical attention after suffering from the consequences of a heart attack.

SALAM FAYYAD (Deir al-Ghussun, Tulkarem 1952) Fayyad holds a degree in engineering from the American University in Beirut, as well as a Masters degree and a Doctorate from the University of Texas. He worked for the World Bank between 1987 and 1995. Since then, and until 2001, he was the International Monetary Fund representative in Jerusalem. After a brief period in the Arab Bank, in 2002 he becomes Finance Minister in the Palestinian government, and begins the process of reforming the PNA's financial infrastructure. He holds the same post again under Mahmoud Abbas' government in 2003, as well as in later governments between then and 2005. He returned to parliament in the Third Way list in the 2006 general elections and was also Finance Minister in the brief national unity government of March 2007, and in July of that year was designated prime minister in the emergency government established in Ramallah by President Mahmoud Abbas after Hamas had taken control of the Gaza Strip in June and after the national unity government had been dissolved.

MUHAMMAD GHAZAL (Nablus 1957) Ghazal is professor of mechanical engineering at Al-Najah University in Nablus, holding a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. He becomes a member of Hamas toward the end of the Eighties. He is the Islamist movement's spokesperson in the West Bank, and it is he who in March 2005 announces

Hamas' decision to take part in the elections for the second Palestinian legislature. He was arrested a few months later, in September, by the Israeli authorities, and remains in administrative detention.

IBRAHIM GHOSHE (Jerusalem 1936) Ghoshe becomes a member of Hamas in 1989. During the Nineties he is Hamas' spokesperson in Amman, as well as being a member of its political bureau. He is an Egyptian-educated engineer, and as a student became an activist in the Islamist sector of the Student League. From 1961, he worked on several projects in Jordan and in Kuwait, becoming director of the Jordanian King Talal Dam until 1978. He was arrested by Jordanian authorities in 1999, and later expelled from the country, and taken in by Qatar. Two years later, the Hashemite Kingdom allowed him to return to Jordan on the proviso that he would no longer take an active part in Hamas' politics from Jordan.

SAMIRA HALAIKA (Hebron 1964) A journalist writing for *Al-Risala* and *Sawt al-Haq*, she returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list on January 25th, 2006. Her husband and one of her sons have been arrested several times by the Israeli authorities for their affiliation to Hamas.

GHAZI HAMAD (Rafah 1964) Hamad joins the Muslim Brotherhood at eighteen, in 1982. He spends five years in the Sudan studying towards a degree in veterinary medicine. He then returns to Gaza and takes part in the First Intifada. In 1989, he is arrested by Israeli authorities, and spends five years in prison, where he becomes Hamas' spokesman. As a journalist, he writes for the weekly *Al-Risala* and emerges as one of Hamas' moderates. He takes part in the *Al-Khalas* experiment – the Islamist party which was supposed to become Hamas' political wing – between 1996 and 2000. He became spokesman for the Haniyeh government of 2006-2007, and later spokesman for the national unity government. He resigned from his post after Hamas' coup in June 2007.

FATHI HAMMAD (Beit Lahya 1961) Hammad becomes a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1983, as well as being a member of several charitable organizations in the Gaza Strip. He was returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list in the January 2006 elections, and achieved notoriety as director of Al-Aqsa TV, the television channel established by Hamas in Gaza.

JAMIL HAMAMI (Ma'an 1952) Hamami is amongst the founders of Hamas in the West Bank. He studied *shari'a* and law at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and has a long curriculum within Palestinian religious institutions, including the Waqf. A member of the Muslim Brotherhood, he was arrested three times by the Israelis, in 1988 for over a year and a half, in 1990 for a further twenty months, and again in 1995. In 1996 he leaves Hamas, after the movement's decision not to take part in the first parliamentary elections for the PNA.

OSAMA HAMDAN (Al-Burej, 1964) Hamas representative in Lebanon since 1998, he received secondary education in Kuwait and later studied chemistry in Jordan. He then returned to Kuwait to work in the oil industry, remaining there for three and a half years.

He joins the Muslim Brotherhood at the beginning of the Eighties, and along with Khaled Meshaal he is amongst those who plan the birth of Hamas. He moves to Iran, where he works first as assistant to Imad al-Alami, Hamas' representative in Teheran, and then takes his place in 1994. From 2003 he has been listed as one of the Specially Designated Global Terrorists by George W. Bush's Administration.

ISMAIL HANIYEH (Al-Shati 1962) In March 2006, Haniyeh is the first Hamas leader to become Prime Minister in a Palestinian National Authority government. He becomes a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early Eighties while studying pedagogy and Arabic language at university, and leads the Islamist student bloc in Gaza, taking part in the First Intifada. In 1988, he is arrested for the first time, and later again in 1989, and in 1992 he is deported to Marj al-Zuhour, in Lebanon. He was an assistant to Ahmed Yassin from 1997 until the death of the founder of Hamas. He survived an assassination attempt against Yassin in September 2003. Prime minister of the single-party Hamas government, he was also Prime Minister of the 2007 national unity government and after Hamas' June coup he acted as head of the executive which *de facto* administered the Gaza Strip.

KHALIL AL-HAYYAH (Gaza City 1960) Al-Hayyah has an education in religious studies culminating in a doctorate obtained in the Sudan, and a professional development entirely within the Islamic University in Gaza City. He is a member of the Palestinian Union of Ulama, and was elected to parliament in January 2006. He is considered one of Hamas' pragmatists, and was among the main mediators of the truces which were reached from time to time between Fatah and Hamas during the violent clashes which took place between 2006 and 2007. On May 20th, 2007 his house is struck by an Israeli air raid, killing seven members of his family.

BASSAM JARRAR (Jenin 1948) Jarrar is considered to be one of the most important and charismatic Islamist thinkers in the West Bank during the 1990s, and directs the Al-Nun Center for Qur'anic Studies in Al-Bireh, Ramallah. He was deported to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon in 1992.

JAMAL MANSOUR (Balata 1960 – Nablus 2001) Mansour was a student leader at Al-Najah University in Nablus during the early Eighties, and became one of the highest-profile members of Hamas in the West Bank. He is among the prisoners deported to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon, and is arrested several times both by the Israelis, spending five years in prison, and by the Palestinian National Authority. He becomes Hamas spokesperson for the West Bank, and is later killed in an Israeli targeted assassination on July 31st, 2001, during the Second Intifada.

MONA MANSOUR (Nablus 1961) Widow of Jamal Mansour, physics teacher, Mansour is one of the six women deputies returned in the January 25th, 2006, general elections in the Change and Reform list, the banner under which Hamas ran.

KHALED MESHAAL (Silwad 1956) Meshaal became a refugee in 1967, and emigrated to Kuwait, where he attended secondary school and later university. He obtains a degree in physics, and is very active in the Islamist student movement. He works in Kuwait until

the Gulf Crisis in 1990, and then moves to Jordan until 1999, when he is expelled to Qatar, before moving to Damascus. For years he is Moussa Abu Marzouq's deputy, until the latter's arrest in 1995, whereupon he becomes the head of the political office abroad until 2004. After Ahmed Yassin's death, he becomes leader of Hamas. In 1997, he survives a poisoning attempt by Mossad, the Israeli secret service. He takes part in intra-Palestinian negotiations between 2005 and 2008. Along with Mahmoud Abbas, he is the main actor in the agreement to establish a national unity government reached in Makkah in February 2007.

BASSAM NA'IM (Beit Hanoun 1963) Na'im is Health Minister in the first government presided by Ismail Haniyeh between 2006-2007, and later Minister for Sports and Youth in the national unity government installed in March 2007. He returns to the Ministry of Health in the *de facto* government presided over by Ismail Haniyeh after Hamas' coup in Gaza in June 2007. Having obtained a degree in medicine and a doctorate in Germany, he worked as a doctor at the Shifa hospital in Gaza City, later becoming director of Hamas' Health Department. His first son, Naim, was a member of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and was killed at the age of seventeen by an Israeli incursion in the Shujaya district of Gaza City.

ABDEL KHALEQ AL-NATSCHÉ (Hebron 1954) A religious authority in Hebron, al-Natsche obtained a degree from the Saudi University of Madina, and was arrested several times by Israeli authorities for his militancy in Hamas, for which he became spokesperson for the Hebron area in 2000. He was also one of the four hundred and fifteen deportees to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon. In 1996, he takes part in the attempts to establish a dialog between Hamas and the PNA. He was one of the first to sign the Prisoners' Document in 2006, along with Marwan Barghouti, as Hamas' most eminent representative in jail. He belongs to one of the most notable clans in Hebron, and has been arrested by the Israelis with the accusation of directing charitable organizations the funds of which were allegedly diverted towards the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

MUHAMMAD JAMAL AL-NATSCHÉ (Hebron 1959) Muhammad al-Natsche is one of Hamas' leading members in the Hebron area, and has been arrested eight times by the Israelis, the last in 2002, carrying a sentence of eight years later extended under administrative detention. He is one of the signatories of the Prisoners' Document in 2006, and was elected in the Change and Reform list in January 2006.

SHAYKH IZZ AL-DIN AL-QASSAM (Jebela, 1882 – Ya'bad, 1935) al-Qassam was a religious man of Syrian origins, who became Haifa's most famous preacher, based in the Al-Istiqlal (Independence) Mosque. He works with the marginalized and the workers of the port area, establishes the YMMA, which becomes one of the city's most important labor organizations, and also works in the countryside around Haifa. He later moves from his political activism to armed struggle against the British Mandate and against Zionists. He is killed in an ambush set by British soldiers.

AHMED QUREYA *nom de guerre* ABU ALA (Abu Dis, Jerusalem 1937) Qureya is one of Fatah's oldest leaders, having been a member since 1968. He became a member of the

Fatah and later PLO Central Committees, as well as of the Palestinian National Council. He followed Arafat into exile, and took part in all stages of the Oslo process. He was the Speaker of the first Palestinian Parliament between 1996 and 2003, later heading PNA governments until 2006.

JIBRIL RAJOURB (Al-Doura, Hebron 1953) Jibril Rajoub was for many years considered the strongman of the PNA security forces in the West Bank, and had been sentenced to life in prison at only fifteen years old for having thrown a grenade against an Israeli Army convoy. He spent seventeen years in prison, until 1985, when he was released in the context of a prisoner exchange. A member of Fatah since 1970, he took part in the First Intifada, was expelled from the West Bank, and became a close adviser to Yasser Arafat in Tunis, and later, after the establishment of the PNA, in Ramallah. He was the head of the Preventive Security Force in the West Bank, National Security Councilor to Arafat in 2003, and later to Mahmoud Abbas in 2005. He is the brother of Hamas' leader in Hebron, Nayef Rajoub.

NAYEF RAJOURB (Al-Doura, Hebron 1958) Nayef Rajoub is the younger brother of Jibril Rajoub. Well-known *imam* and religious leader in Hebron, he was arrested several times by the Israeli authorities ever since 1989. In 1992, he is among the four hundred and fifteen deported to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon. He was returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list in January 2006, and was later appointed Minister for Religious Affairs in Ismail Haniyeh's first government. He was arrested after the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit at the end of June 2006, along with several other Ministers and Hamas Deputies.

MAHMOUD AL RAMAHI (Ramallah 1963) An anaesthetist in Ramallah hospitals, Mahmoud Al Ramahi graduated in Medicine at the University of Rome, and in Italy he spent years, involved in the Muslim community also as the president of the Union of Muslim students. One of the leaders of Hamas in the West Bank, he was in charge of the political bureau of the Hamas movement in the center (Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho,) until the end of the year 1992. Later arrested and detained in Israeli jails, he continued to be involved in Hamas leadership, until nowadays. He was returned to parliament in the Change and Reform list in January 2006, and was later elected Parliament Secretary-General. He was arrested by Israeli authorities on August 20th, 2006, from his family house in Al Bireh, the municipality near Ramallah where his wife was elected municipal councillor in 2005. He was released in March 2009.

ABDEL AZIZ AL-RANTISI (Yibna 1947 – Gaza City 2004) Al-Rantisi became a refugee in 1948, settling in Gaza, and spends his infancy and adolescence in the Khan Younis refugee camp. During the early Seventies, he studies medicine at the University of Alexandria, where he moves closer to political Islam. He returns to Gaza for his practical experience and later returns to Alexandria to pursue a specialization as a pediatrician. He joins the Muslim Brotherhood in 1976, and is one of those participating in the meeting which established Hamas on December 9th, 1987. He is also the author of Hamas' first communiqué. In Marj al-Zuhour, he is the spokesperson for the four hundred and fifteen Islamists which the Israeli authorities had deported. Between 1995 and 1997 he is

detained in an Israeli jail, while between 1998 and 2000 he is incarcerated by the PNA. He is considered to be amongst Hamas' 'hawks', and is wounded in an attempted targeted assassination by the Israelis in Gaza City in June 2003. He takes over from Ahmed Yassin after his assassination on March 22nd, 2004, and less than one month later – on April 17th – is himself killed in a raid. He is amongst the six Hamas leaders included on the Specially Designated Global Terrorists list by George W. Bush's government.

AHMED SAADAT (Al-Bireh, Ramallah 1953) Saadat becomes a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in 1969, and is immediately arrested by the Israeli authorities. Ever since, in several stints he spends eleven years in jail between 1970 and 1992. In the PFLP leadership since 1981, he will head the party in 2001, after the killing of then Secretary General Abu Ali Mustapha in an Israeli targeted assassination. He is arrested in 2002 by the PNA after the assassination of Israeli Minister Revaham Ze'evi carried out by Popular Front militants in revenge for the killing of Abu Ali Mustapha. In the context of an agreement mediated by the United States, Saadat is taken to the Palestinian prison in Jericho, but is kidnapped by Israeli forces in March 2006, and detained in an Israeli jail. He is returned to Parliament in the January 2006 general elections in the Abu Ali Mustapha list.

MARYAM SALEH (Deir al-Amar 1952) Saleh receives an education wholly centered around Islamology, gaining a doctorate in *shari'a* from a Saudi University, and becoming a professor at the Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. In the first Hamas government of March 2006, she is appointed Minister for Women's Affairs. Two months before, she had been returned to Parliament in the Change and Reform list in the January general elections.

NASSER AL-DIN AL-SHA'ER (Sabastya, Nablus 1961) Al-Sha'er is one of the best-known and -appreciated intellectuals of the West Bank, and was President of the Student Council of Al-Najah University in Nablus between 1980 and 1981. He came from a poor family in Sabastya, and specialized in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, obtaining a doctorate from Manchester University, in the UK. He directed the Shari'a Faculty of the Al-Najah University in Nablus for five years, and has been arrested several times by the Israeli authorities, including once during the electoral campaign of 2005-2006. Deputy Prime Minister in the first Haniyeh government of March 2006, he considers himself to be a moderate Islamist, and has always denied being a member of Hamas. He was arrested in August 2006 along with other Ministers and Deputies, but was freed after a few months. He became Education Minister in the national unity government of March 2007. He was then re-arrested in 2009 and later freed.

SALAH SHEHADEH (Al-Shati, 1952 – Gaza City, 2002) Shehadeh was a social worker, and joined the Muslim Brotherhood while a student in the Egyptian city of Alexandria in the early Seventies. He works particularly in Beit Hanoun, not just as a social worker but also as a preacher, later becoming head of the Department of Student Affairs at the Islamic University. Among those closest to Ahmed Yassin, he takes part in the establishment of the first armed Islamist groups, as well as in the establishment of Hamas on December 9th, 1987. Considered to be the leader of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, he spends

twelve years in Israeli prisons until his release in 2000. Accused by the Israelis of being the mastermind behind suicide attacks and behind the production of Qassam rockets, he escapes several assassination attempts. He dies in a targeted killing on July 23rd, 2002, along with another fourteen people.

SAID SIYYAM (Al-Shati 1959 – Gaza City 2009) Siyyam gained a doctorate in *shari'a* studies, and taught sciences and mathematics. He took part in the First Intifada, and joined Hamas ever since its inception. He is among the four hundred and fifteen prisoners deported to Marj al-Zuhour in 1992. Three years later, he was arrested by the PNA's security forces. In 2006, he was elected in the Change and Reform list. During the first Hamas government, as Interior Minister, he had established the Support Force in April 2006, later renamed Executive Force, which depended directly from him and initially composed of around three thousand men, mostly drawn from Hamas and from the Popular Resistance Committees. He also designated Jamal Abu Samhadhana as the Interior Ministry's Director General. Considered one of the 'hawks' in the Hamas leadership in Gaza, he was killed in an Israeli raid during Operation Cast Lead on January 15th, 2009, by means of a one-ton bomb dropped on his brother Iyad's house, where he was attending a meeting. He was killed along with another nine people.

SHAYKH AHMED YASSIN (Al-Joura 1938 – Gaza City 2004) Yassin joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the Fifties, and later became the founder of Hamas. After an accident in his adolescence, he was struck by a serious form of quadriplegia, which would worsen in time. He receives his education in Egypt and would teach in Gaza until his retirement. In 1973, he establishes the *Mujamma al-Islami*, the core around which Hamas would later be established. Well before the birth of Hamas, he is already working towards the establishment of an operational branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. For this, he is sentenced for the first time in 1984 to thirteen years in prison, but is released the following year in the context of a prisoner exchange. The meeting at which Hamas was established took place in his home on December 9th, 1987. He is again arrested in 1989, and remains in prison until 1997, when he is released following Mossad's failed attempt to kill Khaled Meshaal in Amman. He was believed to be Hamas' spiritual and charismatic leader, even though political responsibilities were shared amongst a number of leaders. At dawn on March 22nd, 2004, he is killed in a targeted assassination ordered by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon himself, just outside the mosque near his home in the Al-Sabra district of Gaza City.

AHMED YOUSSEF (Rafah 1950) Youssef leaves the Gaza Strip and moves to Cairo in 1973. After a degree in engineering obtained from Al-Azhar University, he works in the Gulf, and later emigrates the United States, where he obtains two Masters degrees and a Doctorate in Political Science. He replaces Moussa Abu Marzouq as the Director of a Virginia-based Islamist think tank called the United Association for Studies and Research (UASR), which he will lead for fifteen years. He directs the UASR magazine *Middle East Affairs Journal*. A well-known journalist in the Arab world, he wrote a dozen books on political Islam. He returns to Gaza to become Ismail Haniyeh's closest adviser during the first Hamas government and the national unity government. He is considered one of the Islamist movement's most moderate voices.

SHAYKH HASSAN YOUSSEF (Al-Janiya, Ramallah 1955) Youssef is considered Hamas' most important religious figure in the West Bank, and has taken on several positions in Muslim religious institutions in Ramallah, where he also worked in the famous Market Mosque. He is a member of Hamas' political bureau in Ramallah, and has been arrested many times by Israelis authorities. He is among the four hundred and fifteen prisoners deported to Marj al-Zuhour in December 1992, and was detained for short periods several times over the following decade until his arrest in 2002, when he spent over two years in an Israeli jail. He has been under administrative detention since September 2005. He was returned to Parliament as a member of the Change and Reform list in the 2006 general elections.

MAHMOUD A-ZAHHAR (Gaza City 1945) A-Zahhar spends much of his childhood, between 1947 and 1958, in Ismailiyya, Egypt. He returns to Gaza in 1965 and then back to Egypt, to study medicine in Cairo. He experiences the Six-Day War from Egypt, and only in 1972 does he manage to return to the Gaza Strip, where he begins work in the large Shifa hospital of Gaza City, later moving to Khan Younis. In Egypt, he trains as a surgeon. He is amongst the founders of the Islamic University in Gaza City, and amongst the earliest members of Hamas. He is arrested in 1989 and incarcerated for a few months, and is later among the four hundred and fifteen prisoners deported to Marj al-Zuhour in Lebanon, where he is amongst the camp spokesmen. Arrested by the PNA police in 1995, his beard is shaven as a sign of mockery. After the assassinations of Ahmed Yassin and of Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi in 2004, he is among the three leaders of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. He is appointed Foreign Minister in the first Haniyeh government of March 2006. Considered one of the Islamist movement's hawks, he has always rejected this characterization. In 2003, his son Khaled was killed in an attempted targeted assassination against his father. On January 15th, 2008, his last-born son is killed in an armed clash with Israeli soldiers during a raid in Gaza City.

List of acronyms

FATAH	Reverse acronym of the group <i>Harakat al-Tahrir al-Wataniyyah al-Falastiniyyah</i> , lit. Palestinian National Liberation Movement. Fatah is still the largest group within the PLO, formerly headed by Yasser Arafat.
HAMAS	<i>Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya</i> (Islamic Resistance Movement)
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
UNRWA	United Nations Relief Works Agency

Glossary of terms in foreign languages

<i>Aliyah</i>	lit. ascent, refers to the Jewish return from the diaspora
<i>Tahdi'ah</i>	truce, ceasefire, period of calm
<i>Dunum</i>	a measure of land roughly equivalent to one acre
<i>Fedayeen</i>	lit. fighter, partisan. Used to describe the early guerrillas who fought the Zionists during Mandate period, to the members of mostly secular PLO groups such as Fatah.
<i>Al-Haram al-Sharif</i>	Also known as Temple Mount, this designates the location of the Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques. It is the 3 rd holiest site for Muslims, and claimed by Jews as the site of the Second Temple.
<i>Hajj</i>	pilgrimage to Makkah, considered one of the 'Five Pillars' of Islam, duties for the faithful to perform, if they are able
<i>Hijab</i>	lit. covering or separation, indicates various forms of veil often used by practicing Muslim women as a form of modest dress. The cultural use of the veil varies enormously according to both region of provenance to social and political background, going from a thin layer of material drawn half-way over the head, through middling forms which cover the neck, all the way to the <i>niqab</i> which covers the face except eyes, or the <i>burqa</i> which covers the entire body including a net over the eyes.
<i>Hudna</i>	armistice
<i>Iftar</i>	meal for the breaking of the Ramadan daily fast
<i>Ikhwan al-Muslimun</i>	Muslim Brotherhood (full name: <i>al-Gamaat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun</i> : lit. The Society of Muslim Brothers)
<i>Imam</i>	religious figure in Islam
<i>Intifada</i>	lit. uprising. The term is used to refer to two protracted Palestinian uprisings against the Israeli occupation, first in 1987, then in 2001. The first was known as the Intifada al-Oula, or Uprising of the Stones, after the rocks which were famously

symbolically thrown by Palestinian youths at Israeli army tanks and armored cars. The Second and much bloodier Intifada, is also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, as it was sparked by Ariel Sharon's 'promenade' across Temple Mount (the site of the Al-Aqsa or Jerusalem mosque) flanked by 1,000 security personnel at a time of already heightened tensions.

<i>Jihad</i>	<i>lit.</i> effort, struggle; while the term has been appropriated by extremist groups to mean 'holy war', in mainstream jurisprudence – particularly Sunni – armed struggle is justified only under very specific and restricted circumstances.
<i>Mujamma al-Islami</i>	<i>lit.</i> The Muslim Grouping
<i>Nakba</i>	<i>lit.</i> disaster, refers to the Arab defeat in the war of 1948-49, which made around 800,000 Palestinians refugees.
<i>Ramadan</i>	Holy month in Islam, in which the faithful are invited to reflect on their spiritual lives, and in which a daytime fast is observed. The <i>iftar</i> breaks this fast.
<i>Tsahal</i>	Israeli Defense Force.
<i>Shaheed</i>	<i>lit.</i> 'witness', term used to describe those who die doing God's will, and which has been appropriated to describe suicide bombers or 'martyrs'
<i>Shaykh</i>	a Muslim religious title
<i>Shari'a</i>	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Sulta</i>	authority/government; used to refer to the PNA.
<i>Sunna</i>	<i>lit.</i> 'tradition', refers to the majority current in Islam
<i>Tajdid</i>	renewal
<i>Thawra</i>	revolution, insurrection
<i>Waqf</i>	An institution in Islamic jurisprudence which designates a trusteeship: as part of a religious duty to care for the poor and the community as a whole, property, such as land, is given in permanent trust to religious authorities to administer for the benefit of the community. The state has sometimes provided for this administration itself, and indeed often contemporary Muslim-majority countries have 'Ministries of Waqf'.
<i>Zakat</i>	Alms tax, or charitable donation, this is one of the so-called 'Five Pillars' of Islam, the only five religious duties considered compulsory in Islam (subject to one's possibilities – one, should, for example, go on a pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in one's lifetime, providing one is in the position to financially, in health, etc.).