

## HAMAS, FATEH, AND GAZA'S POLITICAL FUTURE

### ***Why has Gaza become associated with Hamas?***

While media coverage and the international community may make it seem like Hamas and Gaza are synonymous, they have always been two separate entities. Hamas is a political party that was elected by the Palestinian people in what EU observers deemed "fair and democratic" elections, with Edward McMillan-Scott, Vice-President of the European Parliament and Chairman of the EP delegation, saying: "The conduct of these elections has provided a model for the wider Arab region and has clearly demonstrated the commitment of the Palestinian people to democracy." Hamas won a majority in the 2006 elections thanks to Muslim, Christian, and secular voters throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel and the international community have since forced Hamas's hand and isolated Gazans from their fellow Palestinians in the West Bank and from the rest of the world. In the process, and for better or worse, Hamas leaders have become the de facto spokesmen for the Palestinians in Gaza. It has been relegated to administering Gaza by itself rather than sharing the governing responsibilities of the entire Palestinian territories, even though they have never had designs on replacing the PA and have publicly pledged allegiance to the results of the democratic elections.



So while Hamas is seen by many people inside the West Bank and Gaza as a legitimate defender - both politically and militarily - of the Palestinian people, most foreign governments do not share this viewpoint. Palestinians living under occupation often feel that Israel and its allies have stacked the deck against them, and Hamas is seen



*Gazans celebrate Hamas's 20th anniversary*

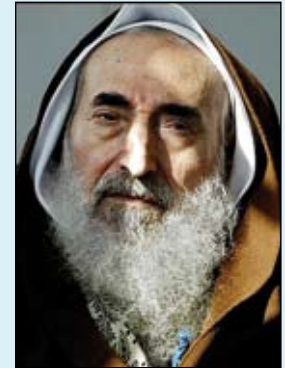
as the only party willing to fight back against occupation, yet the party has been labeled a "terrorist organization" by the United States, Japan, Canada, and Israel. The group has been banned in Jordan. The United Kingdom and Australia only consider the military wing of Hamas - the Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigades - to be a "terrorist group", and the EU refers to Hamas as "involved in terrorist attacks." Since their electoral victory, therefore, Hamas has been the target of a campaign aimed at marginalizing them and eroding their influence. The isolation of Hamas has been stated as the primary goal of the siege on Gaza, and the group has been excluded from the peace process despite a majority of Israeli citizens saying they would prefer peace talks with Hamas to ignoring them<sup>3</sup>. These Israelis may have the right idea, because Hamas has the ability to play the spoiler if any tangible progress is ever made in the peace process. In any case, it is likely that Hamas's reign in Gaza - and therefore the link between the party and the territory - will continue unabated as long as Gaza remains closed off and under siege.

### ***Why is Hamas so powerful in Gaza and not the West Bank?***

Gaza is where the Muslim Brotherhood was established in the 1930s and where the roots of the Hamas movement lie. Though the movement made considerable strides in the West Bank, as evidenced by

the January 2006 elections, their hold has always been strongest in Gaza. It was there that Hamas was officially founded as a resistance movement in 1987, and its origins go back much further.

One of its founders, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, was active in the religious and charitable life of Gaza and the West Bank in the 1960s, when Israeli occupation was in its early stages and new political outlets were growing out of the urge to throw off the grip of the Israelis. Yassin and others had strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and founded a Gaza branch at the outbreak of the first Intifada in December 1987. Its original charter, marked by Palestinian nationalism and anti-Israel sentiments, came out in August 1988. Since then, the group has undergone an evolution of sorts, from social movement to political party. Hamas has maintained its religious roots, but it is the militant wing that has stirred up the most recrimination. Still, support for Hamas was largely built upon the services it provides for the needy and its corruption-free image rather than their violent attacks on Israelis.



*Sheikh Ahmed Yassin*

The popularity of Hamas reached the point that the group transitioned into electoral politics in 2005. While it boycotted the presidential election in January of that year, which ended with Mahmoud Abbas replacing the deceased Yasser Arafat, it did participate in the municipal elections and won control of over one third of the councils. They further challenged the Palestinian political establishment - mainly the ruling Fateh party - which had been derided as corrupt and ineffective, when contesting in the parliamentary elections of 2006, from which they emerged victorious: their "List of Change and Reform" earned 42.9% of the vote and 74 of the 132 seats.

### ***What caused the rift between Hamas and Fateh?***

Actually, the two factions have clashed almost since the creation of Hamas at the beginning of the first Intifada. At that time, the nascent Islamic Resistance Movement presented a new challenge to the PLO factions that had organized under the banner of the United National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). When Fateh and the PLO accepted UN Resolution 242 in the 1988 PNC, it succeeded in demonstrating its pragmatism to the world but ceded some sympathies and credibility among the people to Hamas, which henceforth appeared as the steadfast alternative to the "weakened" Fateh, which had implicitly recognized Israel.

Hamas gained further popularity during the Intifada years through Israel's campaigns of arrest and deportation of hundreds of Hamas's activists, Israel's declaring Hamas an illegal organization, and the movement's anti-peace process stand. First, violent clashes between the two groups occurred in 1991 and 1992 and their positions drifted further apart during the period of the Oslo accords, which Hamas not only opposed but tried to jeopardize through series of deadly attacks and suicide bombings against Israeli targets. In the wake of these attacks, the newly established PA, run by Arafat and Fateh, were pressured by Israel and the US to crack down on Hamas as a precondition for future negotiations. When Hamas rejected a call by the PA made in meetings in Cairo in 1995 to join the PA, reduce violence, and back peace, PA security jailed hundreds of Hamas operatives. Due to its objection to the Oslo process, Hamas also refused to participate in the 1996 elections for the presidency

<sup>3</sup> "Poll: Most Israelis back direct talks with Hamas on Shalit," *Ha'aretz*, 27 February 2008.