

“While an Islamist alternative still remains unacceptable to most Palestinians, the Islamists, notably Hamas, increasingly have become a . . . part of the Palestinian political landscape; as such, they will need to be incorporated into—not marginalized from—any future political arrangement. Despite its militant extremism, the Islamist movement has shown that it can be pragmatic.”

## Hamas and the Transformation(s) of Political Islam in Palestine

SARA ROY

**I**t's over for this generation of Islamic activists. We tried and failed, but time is on our side. We must plant the seeds for an Islamic future in the next generation through social change. We must alter the mindset and mentality of people through an Islamic value system. We must do this through example and education. We must do it quietly and with persistence.”

A senior official in Hamas made this comment to me in 1999, which described without question the thinking of many key figures in the Islamic political leadership in Gaza and the West Bank before the start of the current uprising. In the five years that preceded the recent unrest, the Islamists—particularly Hamas, the largest political faction in the Palestinian Islamic movement—were clearly undergoing a process of deradicalization and searching for political and social accommodation within the status quo of Palestinian society.<sup>1</sup> There was a pronounced shift in emphasis within the movement away from political-military action to social-cultural reform; political violence was slowly but steadily being abandoned as a form of resistance and as a strategy for defeating the

occupier. This shift, by the admission of the Islamist leadership itself, reflected the successful weakening by Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) of the Islamic political sector and the defeat of its military wing. The thrust toward the social was not simply a return to old forms of social service provision commonly associated with the Islamic movement, but included entry into new areas of community and development work that pointed to an emerging new logic between state and society.<sup>2</sup>

The Al Aqsa Intifada, which began in September 2000 in response to seven years of a “peace” process that not only deepened Palestinian dispossession and deprivation but strengthened Israel's occupation, reversed the dramatic changes within the Islamic movement. The militarization of the uprising by Fatah, the dominant (secular) nationalist faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), effectively sidelined the role of civil society—including secular and Islamic institutions—in the struggle to end Israeli occupation. This contributed to the reascendance of the political-military sector as the defining and authoritative component within the Islamic movement. Israel's increasingly brutal and continued assault against Palestinian society and the Palestinian economy and the deliberate destruction of its civic institutions have only strengthened the embrace of the military option by Palestinians, including the Islamists. Despite this, the social core of the Islamic movement remains strong and has become an increasingly important part of the Palestinian social welfare system as unemployment and poverty have grown and the PA's capacity to deliver even the most basic services has diminished.

Relatively little has been written about the main political and social transformations in the Islamic

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<sup>1</sup>“Islamic movement” refers not only to that movement's political sector, in which Hamas predominates, but to its social, cultural, and religious sectors that may or may not have direct links to the political; “Islamist movement” refers to the Islamic political sector in Palestine.

<sup>2</sup>See Sara Roy, “The Transformation of Islamic NGOs in Palestine,” *Middle East Report*, Spring 2000, in which some of the findings described herein were first presented.

movement both before and since the current uprising.<sup>3</sup> While certain key dynamics within the movement (engaging in patterns of social accommodation) have remained relatively unchanged, others (the strengthening—and dominance—of the PA, and the weakening and silencing of the Islamists) are being replaced with altogether new dynamics that portend equally damaging consequences for Palestinian society and for a political resolution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

### POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISLAM DURING OSLO

Hamas—an acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement—was born with the first Palestinian uprising or Intifada, which began in December 1987. The birth of this organization represented the Palestinian embodiment of political Islam in the Middle East. Hamas's evolution and influence were primarily outgrowths of the first Intifada and the ways in which Hamas participated in the uprising: through the operations of its military wing, the work of its political leadership, and its social activities.

Hamas's goals—a nationalist position couched in religious discourse—are articulated in Hamas's key documents: a charter, political memoranda, and communiqués. Some of these documents are undeniably racist and dogmatic, calling for the liberation of Palestine from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River. Yet, later documentation, particularly since the mid-1990s, is less doctrinaire and depicts the struggle as a form of resistance to an occupying power—as a struggle over land and its usurpation, and over how to end the occupation. Recent statements by key Hamas officials maintain that their goals are Israel's withdrawal from lands occupied in the 1967 war, the end of Israeli occupation, the establishment of a Palestinian state, and a solution to the refugee issue. According to a senior political official, "If these things are implemented, the Palestinians will be satisfied, and they will be busy for more than 20 years building their state."<sup>4</sup>

During the years of the Oslo peace process (from September 1993 to September 2000), the political and military sectors of the Islamic movement in which Hamas predominated were substantively weakened by a combination of factors. Most significant was the sustained intense pressure—arrests, imprisonment, execution—imposed by Israel and

the PA, which weakened the organization from within. In addition, these pressures were imposed on Islamic social institutions, the so-called terrorist infrastructure, which resulted in the closing of many charitable societies (although some later reopened). Palestinian Authority President Yasir Arafat thus did a great deal to promote Israel's policy objectives. Not only did he undermine Islamist organizations (notably Hamas and Islamic Jihad, another prominent Palestinian Islamist faction), he weakened Palestinian civil society and the Palestinian/PLO leadership structure. Supporters of the Oslo process termed this "liberalization"—one that not only preceded democracy, but precluded it.

Another critical factor was the Palestinian population itself. As the mass base of support for Hamas, it no longer tolerated extremism in any form. The economic costs of Hamas's military operations and terrorist attacks became too high in an eroding socioeconomic environment, and widespread popular opposition to such attacks played an important role in ending them. The defection of younger Hamas cadres, disillusioned by the failure of their leadership to achieve any meaningful political change, further contributed to Hamas's decline, as did the absence of any alternative political channels of expression. Similarly, the Islamic political sector was weakened by the PA's successful co-optation of some parts of that sector in newly established Islamic parties or groups (for example, the National Islamic Salvation Party, the National Movement for Change, and the Islamic Struggle Movement) that were controlled by the PA. Apparently, no relations existed between these groups and Hamas (or the Islamic Jihad). Another factor that contributed to Hamas's internal malaise was growing popular alienation from politics—perhaps especially political Islam—in favor of cultural and religious practices.

Moreover, with the end of the Intifada and the initiation of the Oslo peace process, the resistance component of the Palestinian struggle—so critical to Hamas's political thinking and action—was undermined. This had direct repercussions for Hamas's social theory and practice, which were largely if not wholly developed and shaped during the uprising. For Hamas, social and political action are inextricably linked. With the removal of the resistance/opposition component from Palestinian political imperatives, what role, at least one that might be acceptable to most Palestinians, was left for Hamas? The resulting problem confronting Hamas (and the Islamic movement generally) was fundamentally one of survival.

<sup>3</sup>This essay will focus only on Hamas, since it is the largest and most influential of the Islamist parties.

<sup>4</sup>See "Interviews from Gaza," *Middle East Policy*, December 2002, p. 109.

In response, there was a steady shift in emphasis, both ideologically and strategically, to the social sector of the Islamic movement, which had always been a critical component of that movement, providing a range of important services and doing so effectively. This shift was a search for accommodation and consensus within the status quo; it also reflected the need for Islamists to adjust to the conditions of the country in which they lived. Strategically, Hamas, and the Islamic movement generally, attempted to carve out public space in which they could operate without too much harassment from the Israeli or Palestinian authorities, and provide much-needed services to an increasingly needy population through a well-developed institutional infrastructure. In this way the Islamists would maintain their popular base of support.

Did direct ties exist between Islamic political-military and social institutions? The debate over the answer has been heated since the founding of Hamas. Conventional wisdom holds that Hamas controls all Islamic social institutions and uses them for political indoctrination and military recruitment.

While a detailed discussion of these interrelationships is beyond the scope of this article, they clearly were not always as routine and assured as is commonly believed—nor as evil where they did exist. Some institutions claimed no political links at all. It cannot be denied, however, that the work of Islamic social institutions, whether aligned or nonaligned, did bolster Hamas’s position during the first Intifada. In the final analysis, more important than the existence of links was the work of these institutions and the services they provided.

Interestingly, many members of the Islamic political leadership did not view the nonaligned sector or the growing dominance of the social sector as a problem. A senior Hamas official explained it this way: “Everyone who is religious is Hamas and anyone who teaches Islamic values furthers Hamas’s goals.” Thus, the organic interconnection between political and social action in Hamas’s ideology meant that the expansion of the social sector served the movement’s objectives even if social institutions were nonaffiliated. Hence, the retreat from the political sphere was pragmatic and accompanied by a need to rediscover Islam and its relevance to society.

In the two- to three-year period before the second Intifida, Hamas was no longer prominently or consistently calling for political or military action against the occupation, but was instead shifting its attention to social works and the propagation of Islamic values and religious practice. According to a key Hamas official interviewed at the time, “Increasingly, Hamas represents religion and an Islamic way of life, not political violence.” Concomitant with this shift toward the sociocultural was a shift in certain terms and ideas, notably a growing acceptance of civil society as a concept—of a society where Islamic and Islamist institutions functioned as part of an integrated whole with their secular counterparts.

The definition of the threats facing Palestinian society also changed. These threats were no longer confined to political or military attacks (by Israel and the PA) against Palestinian resources but also included cultural aggression against Palestinian values, beliefs, and practices. Defeating the occupier

became a matter of cultural preservation, building a moral consensus and Islamic value system as well as political and military power. Hence,

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*A significant part of the Hamas leadership now believes it is in a position to fill any vacuum created by the destruction of the Palestinian Authority—or perhaps displace it altogether.*

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the struggle was not for power per se but for defining new social arrangements and appropriate cultural and institutional models that would meet real social needs, and do so without violence. The idea was not to create an Islamic society but one that was more Islamic, as a form of protection against all forms of aggression. In so doing, the Islamic movement was creating a discourse of empowerment despite the retreat of its long-dominant political sector.

Before Oslo, social action was historically focused on religious education through charitable societies, mosques, *zakat* (alms-giving) committees, health clinics, relief organizations, orphanages, schools, and various clubs. The objective was to teach Islamic values and to embody them through practice—that is, the provision of social services. Recipients were largely the poor and working classes. The Islamists gained a reputation for honesty and integrity in the way they conducted themselves, especially when compared to the PLO. However, and perhaps most important, the shift to social services represented more than a return to Islamist and Islamic roots in the Muslim Brotherhood (the “parent” organization of Hamas, which emerged in the West Bank and Gaza in the 1970s as a social and cultural movement, abstain-

ing from any political or military action against the occupation); it was accompanied by entry into seemingly new areas of social activity or the expansion of activity in pre-existing areas that went beyond the traditional boundaries of religious education and proselytizing that had characterized the social work of the Muslim Brotherhood. This allowed the Islamists entry to, and legitimation by, the existing order, which they apparently were seeking, or at least accepted.

Although social action has a political and revolutionary purpose in Hamas's political ideology, Islamic social activism, as it was evolving in the Oslo context, was becoming increasingly incorporated within the mainstream (which, of course, was one way the ruling authority controlled the Islamic sector, but it worked to the advantage of both; by September 2000 approximately 10 to 40 percent of all social institutions in the West Bank and Gaza were Islamic, according to official and private sources). Some of the clearest examples of this dynamic were in education, health, and banking.

In education, Islamic kindergartens, reputed centers of intense political proselytizing, taught a standard curriculum that was approved by the Palestinian Ministry of Education. The same applied to new Islamic schools at the elementary (and potentially secondary) school level. Interestingly, many but not all Islamic schools taught a religious curriculum, which in a growing number of cases was also standardized, regulated, and approved by the Ministry of Education. In fact, the Islamic movement appears to have strengthened its presence in the education sector. According to the Ministry of Education, 65 percent of all Gazan educational institutions below the secondary level were Islamic (a percentage that has in all likelihood increased).

Other examples were found in the healthcare sector with the emergence of tertiary and highly specialized medical care in Islamic facilities. One of the most sophisticated hospitals in the West Bank and Gaza is in Hebron; it was founded, administered, and financed by the Islamic and Islamist leadership. And a highly respected (by the Palestinian medical establishment) rehabilitation and treatment center for acute spinal cord injuries is an Islamic facility in Gaza.

Initiatives also were taking place in the economic sector with the establishment of an Islamic banking

network. This included 4 Islamic banks with more than 20 branches in the occupied territories, Islamic investment houses, and a range of business enterprises. Furthermore, Hamas most likely had no control, direct or even indirect, over certain kinds of Islamic economic institutions (such as those in banking and finance), given its own limited organizational structure and the tight regulation of such activities by government agencies. In all these cases, Islamic institutions were working with and were regulated by the appropriate Palestinian ministries and agencies and in many cases had what appeared to be good working relationships with the governmental sector.

Arguably, these expanded or new areas of Islamic social activity represented the normalization, institutionalization, and professionalization of the Islamic sector in the public curriculum, the system of health-care delivery, and banking and finance. At the same time, the Islamic sector was not advancing a policy of isolation but was calling for greater accommodation and cooperation with local, national, and international actors, including certain corresponding professional

institutions in Israel. In one healthcare institution in Gaza, which was considered "Hamas" since some members of its management team were political supporters of the organization, the medical director proudly described a training program inside Israel to which he sent some of his staff. In all likelihood, this decision could not have been taken without the consent of the Islamic political leadership. This position advocating greater social (and political?) integration with non-Islamic actors, both internal and external, appeared widespread among officials in the Islamic social sector and was the stated position of some members of the political leadership.

The shift to social action, to new forms of social engagement, and to the normalization and institutionalization of the Islamic and Islamist agendas during the Oslo period represented an important change within the Islamist movement. Hamas or its successors seemed to be slowly moving away from the political extreme toward a more centrist position, trying to place itself between the corruption of the PA and its donor-linked development projects and violent Islamic militants and the impossibilities they came to represent. Islamists perhaps were trying to limit the arbitrary political power of the PA not through political or military confrontation,

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which had failed and was costly, but through mobilizing people at the sociocultural level and allowing the social part of the movement to define, pragmatically and nonviolently, the Islamic and Islamist agenda for some time to come. Although it was not smooth or quick, the transformation from militancy to accommodation was taking place.

### POLITICAL ISLAM'S REASCENDANCE

The start of the second Palestinian Intifada on September 28, 2000, coupled with the impact of September 11, dramatically changed the environment in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>5</sup> Preexisting political arrangements have been severely disrupted, economic conditions have deteriorated, and key social structures and mediatory institutions have weakened. Within this context of desperation and hopelessness, the Islamist opposition, notably Hamas, has reasserted itself.

Several political factors have contributed to the reascendance of the Islamists. Among the most important is the abnegation of any leadership or command role by the PA during the uprising, and the emergence of a younger generation of more militant Fatah cadres who assumed leadership of the uprising early on. The resulting militarization of the Intifada not only marginalized the role of Palestinian civil society, but discredited and eclipsed the function of the older generation of PA/PLO elites. Fatah, however, has not been able to exert control over the PA, the Islamists, or other factions, partly because of its own internal divisions. The internal political splits within the Palestinian national movement and the strengthening of armed and cross-factional militias seeking political power and an end to occupation through violent confrontation, coupled with the overall militarization of the uprising, created the time and space for Hamas to rebuild its political-military infrastructure and pursue a form of militancy that went beyond Fatah's (which confined operations to the occupied territories). By attacking civilian targets inside Israel—a strategy subsequently followed by Fatah and others—Hamas not only succeeded in gaining support from an increasingly desperate population, it also undermined the PA—which was blamed for the attacks—and the diplomatic initiatives it was pursuing.

<sup>5</sup>Some points in this section are raised and discussed in greater detail in Mouin Rabbani and Sara Roy, "Palestinian Politics and September 11th: Critical Changes in Policy and Structure," *Middle East Policy*, December 2002; and Mouin Rabbani, "The Costs of Chaos in Palestine," ms., 2002.

Other factors contributing to the reemergence and strengthening of the Islamists include: the internal political marginalization of Yasir Arafat and the growing international isolation of the Palestinian leadership, which was later transformed into an explicit attempt by Israel and the United States at "regime change"; the politico-military campaign against the Palestinian Authority, which has resulted in the large-scale destruction of its institutional infrastructure—including its security forces and leadership/command structure—and the immobilization of the PA as a political institution and administrative apparatus; the absence of a common approach to the conflict and a coherent strategy of resistance, which reflect the lack of a unifying national liberation movement; the growing decentralization of Palestinian politics and rising political fragmentation, where central authority steadily ceded to local control; the implementation of (sometimes) conflicting political strategies by different factions (the PA's eroding political/diplomatic track, Fatah's war of attrition, and the Islamists' larger war) that perpetuate organizational chaos politically; the acceptance, especially by the United States, of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's agenda, which aims to eliminate the PA and preclude the establishment of a Palestinian state through continued Israeli settlement expansion, land expropriation, and economic dispossession; the failure of the United States to pursue seriously a political resolution of the conflict; and the absence of any credible prospect for a meaningful political settlement.

These factors have not only catalyzed the Islamist factions and their radicalization, but have resulted in a balance of power that could slowly shift in their favor. This potential shift is underlined by three dynamics: changing popular sentiment, the PA/nationalist-Islamist relationship, and Israeli policy toward the Islamist opposition.

#### *The shift in popular sentiment*

Historically, popular support for Hamas and other Islamist factions was strongest in the perceived absence of political progress. During the Oslo period, when Palestinians were hopeful of a political settlement, support for Hamas—never substantial—waned, but when prospects dimmed, as they did after the failed Camp David summit in July 2000, support rose, albeit incrementally. Before the Intifada, political despair did not translate into support for the Islamists but into losses for the nationalists. After Camp David, for example, Palestinian analyst Khalil Shikaki found that support for Arafat dropped to 47 percent from its peak of 65 percent

in 1996, and support for Fatah declined to 37 percent after having reached an unprecedented 55 percent in 1996 (when Palestinian support for the peace process reached 80 percent and support for violent attacks against Israeli targets dropped to 20 percent). Almost one year into the current Intifada, Arafat's popularity plummeted to 33 percent and Fatah's to 29 percent.

Popular desertion of the secular nationalist forces did not translate into support for the Islamists; instead, people remained uncommitted (the popularity of the Islamists rose only from 15 percent in 1996 to 17 percent in 2000). This changed during the Intifada, however, when loyalties began to shift to the Islamists in the context of growing desperation and political failure. According to Shikaki, by July 2001 the Islamist factions claimed 27 percent of polled support, which represented an 80 percent increase from 1996. Furthermore, during this period, support for the opposition, both Islamist and nationalist, reached 31 percent, which exceeded that of Fatah and its associates at 30 percent. Yet, simultaneously, a December 25, 2001 poll by the Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah showed that while 61 percent of Palestinians believed that armed confrontations with Israel had helped achieve national rights where negotiations had failed, 71 percent supported an immediate return to negotiations and 73 percent supported reconciliation with the Israelis after the establishment of a Palestinian state recognized by Israel. A year later, in the context of dramatic economic decline and political disintegration, a Bir Zeit University poll revealed that 42 percent of Palestinians favored an Islamic state, a finding that was totally unprecedented.

### *Internal dynamics*

With the Intifada, the Palestinian political environment underwent dramatic changes. First was the restoration of the resistance component and militancy to the Palestinian struggle, embraced by all factions, not just the Islamist opposition. Second was the attempt by the nationalist forces to accommodate the demands of the Islamists for the sake of maintaining national unity and an internal political consensus. Third was the effort by the Islamists to normalize their relationship with the PA, without conceding to its political conditions.

For the PA, compromise meant remaining silent on calls for international protection, the application of the Geneva Conventions, and cooperation with the Israeli peace movement, all of which the Islamists reject. For the nationalist factions, compromise also

meant bringing the Islamists into an institutional alliance of sorts to preclude the formation of parallel Islamist institutions and strike forces, which happened during the first Intifada. For the Islamists, compromise was cooperating with the nationalist forces in a military campaign against the occupation—coordination in the field, but not in politics. As such, the Islamists were granted *de facto* if not *de jure* veto power in political decision-making. The establishment early in the Intifada of the National and Islamic Forces (NIF)—a broad coalition of 14 political factions and civic organizations whose mandate is coordinating the uprising—was one practical expression of this cooperation. Because the PA rejects the NIF's supervisory role, the factions maintain they are not bound by NIF decisions, limiting the NIF's effectiveness.

The result has been uneven and tendentious. While there have been several examples of cooperation and coordination—the PA's release of jailed Islamic activists, Hamas's support of Arafat during the siege of his compound by Israeli forces, and cease-fire agreements between Hamas and the PA—tensions remain high and conflicts intense. For example, in the absence of a common political program (itself the result of Arafat's failure to institutionalize a political relationship between the PA and the factions and to provide them with a viable decision-making role), factions compete and undermine each other, contributing to greater organizational chaos within the domestic political environment. And while the relationship between the PA and the nationalist and Islamist factions is complex, defying simplistic notions of strategic control or open opposition, the Palestinian Authority cannot and will not exercise real authority over them in the absence of meaningful political prospects. Within this maelstrom, Hamas and other militant factions conduct suicide-bombing attacks in Israeli cities—actions in opposition to official PA policy but for which the PA is held accountable, and to which Israel responds with devastating results.

With the PA weakened by Israeli actions, Hamas can weaken it further to the point where a significant part of the Hamas leadership now believes it is in a position to fill any vacuum created by the destruction of the Palestinian Authority—or perhaps displace it altogether. While it is impossible to predict whether this will occur, Hamas's role clearly is gaining importance. In early September 2002, before Israel's siege of Arafat's compound later that month, the United States held indirect contacts with senior Hamas officials and apparently promised them that, in exchange

### FILLING A SOCIAL VACUUM

THE RENEWED DOMINANCE of the Islamic political and military sectors has not eclipsed the importance or the role of the social. Given the dire economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza—with unemployment and poverty rates approaching 60 percent and 70 percent, respectively—and the eroded capacity of the PA to deliver basic social services, Islamic social organizations have become an increasingly important part of the Palestinian social welfare system. As during the Oslo period, they are providing services the PA is unable to provide and doing so with the tacit, if not explicit, support of the authorities. Indeed, the periodic closing of Islamic charities and other social institutions for political reasons is often temporary because without their services a vacuum would result, which the PA is clearly incapable of filling. As such, there appears to be no organized PA campaign against them. This has further strengthened the institutionalization and normalization of Islamic organizations within the Palestinian status quo.

In what appears to be a new dynamic, Islamic institutions, unlike their secular civic counterparts—which are also engaged in activities such

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\*I would like to thank Mouin Rabbani, who provided many of the details cited in this section.

as human rights, advocacy, and political reform that highlight the PA's deficiencies—do not challenge the PA's work or methods but rather complement it. While it is difficult to know what, if anything, this complementarity means, it does suggest the extension, in some form, of the Islamists' search for accommodation that defined their relations with the Palestinian Authority before the Intifada. This, of course, could change if relations between Hamas and the PA deteriorate further in the months ahead.

In contrast to the PA, there has been an international effort since the September 11 attacks on the United States to restrict the activities of the Islamic social sector based on the belief that they contribute to the political appeal and growth of Hamas. However, it is unclear whether Islamic social organizations in the reoccupied West Bank in particular are being closed or dismantled by Israel for the same reason, or whether Israel is allowing these institutions to function as part of a possible strategy of eliminating a secular alternative. Another important question concerns internal relations between the Islamic social and political sectors. If Hamas assumes a greater political role with the PA's demise, what if anything is Hamas doing with Islamic institutions to prepare for this scenario, and how would the role of Islamic organizations change should such a scenario be realized?\*

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for their agreement to become part of a secular, democratic unity government in a new Palestinian state (a discussion that Hamas was already conducting with Fatah, and which no doubt contributed to the six-week lull in suicide bombings—a lull during which at least 80 Palestinians were killed), the United States would pressure Israeli officials to end their policy of targeted assassinations and arrests of Hamas officials. The American envoy engaged in the “talks” explained that while he could not guarantee Israeli acceptance, he did indicate that the United States welcomed Hamas's decision to become a “legitimate part of the political process.” The United States clearly

also endorsed Hamas–Fatah talks. Reportedly, Hamas officials were pleased by these signals and by United States indications that it would welcome Hamas's political participation.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Israeli policy and the Islamist opposition*

United States–Hamas contacts—of which Israel was fully aware—ended when the Israeli army arrested a politically moderate Hamas official in Ramallah on September 9, which Hamas interpreted as a deliberate attempt by the Sharon government to undermine its exchange with the Americans. A few days later, Israel launched an attack in Rafah that killed nine Palestinians, including civilians. Predictably, a suicide bomber staged an attack on a bus in Tel Aviv on September 19, killing six people. This was followed by Israel's siege of the presidential compound in Ramallah. Under United States pressure, Sharon ordered an end to the operation shortly after.

Other Hamas–PA cease-fires have been undermined by Israeli attacks. Alex Fishman, the security commentator for the right-of-center *Yediot Achronot*, Israel's largest mass-circulation newspaper, detailed

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<sup>6</sup>Mark Perry, “Israeli Offensive Disrupts US–Hamas Contacts,” *Palestine Report*, October 9, 2002 <<http://www.jmcc.org/media/report/02/Oct/2b.htm>>. A senior American diplomat indicated that the United States understood that “[t]here is a difference between Hamas and, say, the Iranian mullahs. The one tradition is nationalist and revolutionary, the other is clerical and religious. We know the difference. We know who the honest actors are. We don't happen to like Hamas tactics, but we know there's a world of difference between what they want and what, say, Mullah Omar wants.”

in the November 25, 2001 issue of the newspaper how the assassination that November of Mahmud Abu Hanud, a key Hamas figure, shattered a Hamas promise not to carry out suicide bombings inside Israel: "Whoever gave the green light to this act of liquidation knew full well that he was thereby shattering in one blow the gentleman's agreement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority; under that agreement, Hamas was to avoid in the near future suicide bombings inside the Green Line [Israel's pre-1967 borders] of the kind perpetrated at the Dolphinarium [a discotheque in Tel Aviv]."

"Such an agreement did exist, even if neither the PA nor Hamas would admit it in public. It is a fact that, while the security services did accumulate repeated warnings of planned Hamas terrorist attacks within the Green Line, these did not materialize. That cannot be attributed solely to the Shabak's [the General Security Services'] impressive success in intercepting the suicide bombers and their controllers. Rather, the respective leaderships of the PA and Hamas came to the understanding that it would be better not to play into Israel's hands by mass attacks on its population centers.

"This understanding was, however, shattered by the assassination the day before yesterday—and whoever decided upon the liquidation of Abu Hanud knew in advance that that would be the price. The subject was extensively discussed both by Israel's military echelon and its political one before it was decided to carry out the liquidation."

On December 1 and 2 came the Hamas bombings in Jerusalem's Zion Square and of a bus in Haifa in which 25 Israelis were killed, many of them children.

In July 2002, with the help of European diplomats, the Fatah *tanzim*—as opposed to the PA—and Hamas had reached an understanding that all attacks inside Israel would stop, and they were preparing to issue a formal statement to that effect on July 22.<sup>7</sup> Hamas's spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, announced publicly that Hamas was considering a cease-fire if Israel withdrew its troops from recently reoccupied Palestinian population centers. Just 90 minutes before the proclamation was to be announced, the Israeli authorities bombed the Gaza apartment of Hamas military wing leader Sheikh Salah Shehada, killing him and 16 others, including 11 children. More Hamas suicide bombings in Israel

followed. On November 26, 2002, Israeli helicopters targeted and killed the commanders of the military wings of Hamas and the Al Aqsa Brigades in the Jenin refugee camp. Both factions promised to carry out large-scale attacks inside Israel in revenge.

Suicide bombings are horrific and criminal but what do these examples say about the policies of the Sharon government? The argument has been made that Sharon's policies aim to undermine any possibility of a political settlement, which would involve compromises his government is unwilling to make, preferring instead a decisive military victory and long-term interim arrangements dictated by Israel, no matter the cost. Yet, Israel's policies toward the Islamist opposition may have another dimension. Some analysts maintain that while Hamas leaders are being targeted, Israel is simultaneously pursuing its old strategy of promoting Hamas over the secular nationalist factions as a way of ensuring the ultimate demise of the PA, and as an effort to extinguish Palestinian nationalism once and for all. In fact, some allies of Arafat accuse Hamas of being in tacit alliance with Israel. In so doing, the argument continues, Israel creates a justification for maintaining the occupation since it will deal with Palestinians only as militant radicals and not on the basis of national rights or as a legitimate part of a political process. But then what?

#### THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE

While an Islamist alternative still remains unacceptable to most Palestinians, the Islamists, notably Hamas, increasingly have become a vocal and institutionalized part of the Palestinian political landscape; as such, they will need to be incorporated into—not marginalized from—any future political arrangement. Despite its militant extremism, the Islamist movement has shown that it can be pragmatic.

The political transformations of Hamas and the Islamic movement generally derive from a combination of internal and external factors that have only been touched on here. As for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the greatest threat to peace is not extremism—Islamic or secular—but the context that produces and nurtures it: occupation. The fundamental problem among Palestinians is that the majority of people have no options, power, or future. Radical Islam emerged not because people were opposed to political and economic change but because they were continuously denied it. Palestinians are a secular people seeking their political rights and national liberation, but this could change if their misery deepens and their possibilities end. ■

<sup>7</sup>The *tanzim* is an armed militia consisting of Fatah street cadre/activists and elements of the PA's Preventative Security Force that has undertaken many military operations.