

## The rise and rise of Hamas

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In light of Hamas' seizure of the Gaza Strip, it is worthwhile to understand how this radical Islamist organization came to play such a major role in Palestinian political life and how Israel and the United States contributed to making that possible.

Ironically, it was Israel which encouraged the rise of the Palestinian Islamist movement as a counter to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the secular coalition composed of Fatah and various leftist and other nationalist movements.

Beginning in the early 1980s, with generous funding from the US-backed family dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, the antecedents of Hamas began to emerge through the establishment of schools, health care clinics, social service organizations and other entities which stressed an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam, which up to that point had not been very common among the Palestinian population. The hope was that if people spent more time praying in mosques, they would be less prone to enlist in left-wing nationalist movements challenging the Israeli occupation.

While supporters of the secular PLO were denied their own media or right to hold political gatherings, the Israeli occupation authorities allowed radical Islamic groups to hold rallies, publish uncensored newspapers and even have their own radio station. For example, in the occupied Palestinian city of Gaza in 1981, Israeli soldiers - who had shown no hesitation in brutally suppressing peaceful pro-PLO demonstrations - stood by when a group of Islamic extremists attacked and burned a PLO-affiliated health clinic in Gaza for offering family planning services for women.

Hamas, an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement), was founded in 1987 by Sheik Ahmed Yassin, who had been freed from prison when Israel conquered the Gaza Strip 20 years earlier. Israel's priorities in suppressing Palestinian dissent during this period were revealing: in 1988, Israel forcibly exiled Palestinian activist Mubarak Awad, a Christian pacifist who advocated the use of Gandhian-style resistance to the Israeli occupation and Israeli-Palestinian peace while allowing Sheik Yassin to circulate anti-Jewish hate literature and publicly call for the destruction of Israel by force of arms.

American policy was not much different: up until 1993, US officials in the consular office in Jerusalem met periodically with Hamas leaders while they were barred from meeting with anyone from the PLO. This policy continued despite the fact that the PLO had renounced terrorism and unilaterally recognized Israel as far back as 1988.

## **Early boost**

One of the early major boosts for Hamas came when the Israeli government expelled more than 400 Palestinian Muslims in late 1992. While most of the exiles were associated with Hamas-affiliated social service agencies, very few had been accused of any violent crimes. Since such expulsions are a direct contravention to international law, the UN Security Council unanimously condemned the action and called for their immediate return.

The incoming Bill Clinton administration, however, blocked the United Nations from enforcing its resolution and falsely claimed that an Israeli offer to eventually allow some of exiles back constituted a fulfillment of the UN mandate. The result of the Israeli and American actions was that the exiles became heroes and martyrs; the credibility of Hamas in the eyes of the Palestinians grew enormously - and so did their political strength.

Still, at the time of the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO in 1993, polls showed that Hamas had the support of only 15% of the Palestinian community. Support for Hamas grew, however, as promises of a viable Palestinian state faded and Israel continued to expand its colonization drive on the West Bank, doubling the number of settlers over the next dozen years. The rule of Fatah leader and Palestine Authority president Yasser Arafat and his colleagues proved to be corrupt and inept, while Hamas leaders were seen to be more honest and in keeping with the needs of ordinary Palestinians.

In early 2001, Israel cut off all substantive negotiations with the Palestinians and a devastating US-backed Israeli offensive that followed destroyed much of the Palestine Authority's infrastructure, making prospects for peace and statehood even more remote. Israeli closures and blockades sank the Palestinian economy into a serious depression and Hamas-run social services became all the more important for ordinary Palestinians.

Seeing how Fatah's 1993 decision to end the armed struggle and rely on a US-led peace process had resulted in increased suffering, Hamas' popularity grew well beyond its hardline fundamentalist base, and its use of terrorism against Israel - despite being immoral, illegal and counter-productive - seemed to express the sense of anger and impotence of wide segments of the Palestinian population.

Meanwhile - in a policy defended by both the Bush administration and Democratic leaders in Congress - Israel's use of death squads resulted in the deaths of Sheik Yassin and scores of other Hamas leaders, turning them into martyrs in the eyes of many Palestinians and increasing Hamas' support still further.

## **The election of a Hamas government**

With the Bush administration insisting that the Palestinians stage free and fair elections after the death of Arafat in 2004, Fatah leaders hoped that coaxing Hamas into the electoral process would help weaken its more radical elements. However, the response from Washington was overwhelmingly negative.

In December 2005, a month prior to the Palestinian election, the House of Representatives passed a resolution by an overwhelming 397-17 majority criticizing Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, for "his willingness to see Hamas participate in the elections without first calling for it to ... renounce its goal of destroying the state of Israel".

However, neither House Speaker Nancy Pelosi nor other House leaders have ever criticized Israeli

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for his willingness to see parties, such as the National Union - which seeks to destroy any Palestinian national entity and expel its Arab population - participate in Israeli elections, an apparent acknowledgement that while Congress sees Israel's survival is axiomatic, Palestine's survival is an open-ended question. (In any case, under the Palestinian Authority, as with the state of Israel, the head of state simply does not have the authority to ban a political party simply because of its ideology, however repugnant.)

Similarly, the resolution - co-sponsored by Pelosi and other Democratic leaders - insisted that groups such as Hamas "should not be permitted to participate in Palestinian elections until such organizations recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state". Ironically, however, the United States allows a number of political organizations, such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Workers World Party - which also refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state - to participate in US elections, indicating that the apparent belief by Pelosi and her colleagues that Arab nations should not be able to experience the same degree of democracy Americans enjoy in their country which allows even those with extreme views to seek political office.

The Senate also weighed in. A letter signed by 73 of 100 senators - including 2008 Democratic presidential aspirants Hillary Clinton, Christopher Dodd and Barack Obama - also questioned the decision to allow Hamas to participate in the election on the grounds that "no democracy in the world allows a political party to bear its own arms". Ironically, just weeks earlier the Senate had voted unanimously to praise the recently completed Iraqi parliamentary elections in which a number of political parties with their own militias openly participated and formed the new Iraqi government.

In addition, the United Kingdom - America's closest ally - allowed Sinn Fein to operate a legal political party and participate in elections even during the decades in which its armed wing, the Provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army, engaged in terrorist attacks against British citizens with no criticism of Westminster emanating from Capitol Hill.

Despite US objections, the Palestinian parliamentary elections went ahead in January 2006 with Hamas' participation. They were monitored closely by international observers and were universally recognized as free and fair. With reformist and leftist parties divided into a half dozen competing slates, Hamas was seen by many Palestinians disgusted with the status quo as the only viable alternative to the corrupt Fatah incumbents and with Israel refusing to engage in substantive peace negotiations with Abbas' Fatah-led government, they figured there was little to lose in electing Hamas.

In addition, factionalism within the ruling party led a number of districts to have competing Fatah candidates. As a result, even though Hamas only received 44% of the vote, they captured a majority of Parliament and the right to select the prime minister and form a new government.

Ironically, the position of prime minister did not exist under the original constitution of the Palestine Authority, but was added in March 2003 at the insistence of the United States, which desired a counterweight to the president, Arafat. As a result, while the elections allowed Abbas to remain as president, he was forced to share power with Ismail Haniya, the Hamas prime minister.

### **Efforts to undermine the government**

Despite claiming support for free elections, the United States tried from the outset to undermine the Hamas government. It was largely due to US pressure that Abbas refused Hamas' initial invitation to form a national-unity government that would include Fatah and from which some of the more hardline Hamas leaders would have presumably been marginalized.

The Bush administration pressured the Canadians, Europeans and others in the international community to impose stiff sanctions on the Palestine Authority, though a limited amount of aid continued to flow to government offices controlled by Abbas.

Once one of the more prosperous regions in the Arab world, decades of Israeli occupation had resulted in the destruction of much of the indigenous Palestinian economy, making the Palestine Authority dependent on foreign aid to provide basic functions for its people. The impact of these sanctions, therefore, was devastating. The Iranian regime rushed in to partially fill the void, providing millions of dollars to run basic services and giving the Islamic Republic - which until then had not been allied with Hamas and had not been a major player in Palestinian politics - unprecedented leverage.

Meanwhile, record unemployment led angry and hungry young men to become easy recruits for Hamas militants. One leading Fatah official noted, "For many people, this was the only way to make money." Some Palestinian police, unpaid by their bankrupt government, clandestinely joined the Hamas militia as a second job, creating a dual loyalty.

The demands imposed at the insistence of the Bush administration and Congress on the Palestine Authority to lift the sanctions appeared to be designed to be rejected and were widely interpreted as a pretext for punishing the Palestinian population for voting the wrong way. For example, the United States demanded that the Hamas-led government unilaterally recognize the right of the state of Israel to exist, even though Israel has never recognized the right of the Palestinians to have a state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip or anywhere else.

Other demands included an end of attacks on civilians in Israel while not demanding that Israel likewise end its attacks on civilian areas in the Gaza Strip. They also demanded that the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority accept all previously negotiated agreements even as Israel continued to violate key components of the Wye River Agreement and other negotiated deals with the Palestinians.

While Hamas honored a unilateral ceasefire regarding suicide bombings in Israel, border clashes and rocket attacks into Israel continued. Israel, meanwhile, with the support of the Bush administration, engaged in devastating air strikes against crowded urban neighborhoods, resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties. Congress also went on record defending the Israeli assaults - which were widely condemned in the international community as excessive and in violation of international humanitarian law - as legitimate acts of self-defense.

A House resolution last summer, passed by an overwhelming 410-8 majority, went so far as to praise Israel's "longstanding commitment to minimizing civilian loss and welcomes Israel's continued efforts to prevent civilian casualties" despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Only seven Democrats voted against the resolution, which put them on record commending President George W Bush "for fully supporting Israel as it responds to these armed attacks by terrorist organizations and their state sponsors".

It was out of this environment that Hamas grew from a radical minority to an electoral majority and is now patrolling the streets of the Gaza Strip in full control.

### **Current US policy**

Since their humiliating defeat in the Gaza Strip, Fatah militia have been engaging in a wave of arrests and kidnappings of Hamas activists in the West Bank. This has led to fears of a popular backlash if the repression goes too far.

Furthermore, while Hamas' popular support has traditionally been less in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip, where the majority of its residents live in impoverished refugee camps, the Islamist group's support is still quite strong in the West Bank. Indeed, the weakness of Fatah's resistance to the Hamas uprising in the Gaza Strip - despite having a larger number and better-armed fighters than Hamas - is indicative of their continued weak political standing.

Despite its dubious constitutionality, Abbas announced a new emergency cabinet without any Hamas participation within days of Fatah's ouster from the Gaza Strip, and included some prominent technocrats, reformers and independents.

His new prime minister, Salam Fayyad, is a highly intelligent economist and former World Bank official who lived for most of his adult life in the United States. He served as the representative for the International Monetary Fund to the Palestine Authority before briefly becoming its finance minister in 2005 in a belated effort by Abbas to clean up the Fatah government's chronic corruption.

Fayyad then formed a small centrist party with scholar and human-rights activist Hanan Ashrawi to challenge both Fatah and Hamas in last year's parliamentary election, but their slate received only 2.4% of the vote. Though a sincere nationalist and reformer, Fayyad's close ties to the United States and international financial institutions, coupled with his poor electoral performance, raises questions regarding his legitimacy in the eyes of most Palestinians.

The makeup of his new government is not Abbas' biggest problem, however. The Palestinians recognize that the United States has defended repeated Israeli attacks against Palestinian population centers, supported the Israeli seizure of the Gaza Strip and vetoed a series of UN Security Council resolutions and blocked enforcement of a series of others calling on Israel to abide by international humanitarian law.

They are aware that the Bush administration and Congress have endorsed Israel's annexation of Arab East Jerusalem and surrounding areas, funded Israel's occupation and colonization of the West Bank and defended Israel's construction of an illegal separation barrier deep inside occupied Palestinian territory.

They also know how the United States has rejected Palestinian proposals for a permanent peace with Israel in return for a full Israeli withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory while backing Israeli plans to annex much of the West Bank, confining the Palestinians into tiny cantons surrounded by Israel. As a result, the strong US backing shown so far by Washington for Abbas' new government may not help its credibility among the Palestinian population. Indeed, it is already being widely labeled as a collaborationist regime due to its strong backing from Israel and the United States.

Israel will unfreeze funds seized from the export of Palestinian goods to Abbas' new government. The government's hope is that by improving the quality of life for Palestinians, it will show how much better things are under Fatah than under Hamas and weaken support for the Islamists.

### **Concrete political initiatives**

However, unless there are concrete political initiatives as well, this will not be enough.

Abbas has called for peace with strict security guarantees for Israel, including the dismantling of Hamas' militias, in return for an independent state on the 22% of Palestine occupied by Israel since 1967, and has even expressed his willingness to accept minor and reciprocal border adjustments.

Polls show that a majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip would accept such an agreement.

Israel has refused that offer, however, insisting on its right to annex large swaths of West Bank territory, including Arab East Jerusalem, in such a way that would make a contiguous and viable Palestinian state impossible.

Under this Israeli plan - endorsed by the Bush administration and a broad bipartisan majority of Congress - Israel would be able to control Palestinian air space, Palestinian water resources and movement in and out of the Palestinian entity and between its separated territories.

These non-contiguous Palestinian cantons, therefore, would more closely resemble the infamous Bantustans of apartheid South Africa than a viable independent state. And, unless the Palestinians have strong prospects that a viable independent state will eventually emerge, the credibility of Abbas' government will erode and the appeal by the radicals of Hamas will grow.

The Israeli government, with no apparent objection from the United States, has thus far refused to even put a freeze on the growth of Israeli settlements on the West Bank that are eating up ever more Palestinian land needed to make a Palestinian state viable.

Furthermore, Israeli occupation forces have yet to lift the scores of checkpoints paralyzing economic life in the West Bank. Israel also continues to refuse to release Palestinian prisoners, including Marwan Barghouti, the charismatic Fatah reformer who would be the most likely Palestinian leader to unite the country in accepting a two-state solution with Israel. Such confidence-building measures are critical in the period prior to a resolution of the important final status issues if talks are to move forward and extremists are to be marginalized.

However, as a result of the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip, according to the Israeli newspaper Yediot Ahronot, "The prime minister's advisers [declared] the Palestinian Authority dead, [saying] there is no one to talk to ... and that the Bush administration will not put pressure on Olmert at this stage to come up with ideas for renewing the negotiations with Abbas and promoting a diplomatic solution."

As Robert Malley, Middle East and North Africa program director for the International Crisis Group and former and former National Security Council member and special assistant for Arab-Israeli Affairs under president Bill Clinton, has noted how "almost every decision the United States has made to interfere with Palestinian politics has boomeranged".

Hamas' armed takeover of the Gaza Strip has shown this to be all too true, and the US embrace of Abbas' new government without concomitant pressure on Israel may prove to have similar results.

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