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CHALLENGE AND COUNTERCHALLENGE: HAMAS'S RESPONSE TO OSLO

WENDY KRISTIANASEN

While the Oslo agreement consecrated Hamas's role as a new national resistance to Israel, it ushered in a reality that progressively would tie the movement's hands. This article traces the impact on Hamas of the installation of the Palestinian Authority, particularly in terms of undermining the cohesion of a decentralized leadership whose various wings came to face differing circumstances. After the disarray following the February–March 1996 suicide bombings, Hamas appeared to be on the upswing, with its top leadership back from prison and the forging of a new consensus. With the Wye River Memorandum's determination to destroy Hamas, however, the future remains uncertain.

OSLO CAME ABOUT LARGELY AS A RESULT of Hamas's challenge to the PLO and Israel. In turn, Oslo has been *the* great challenge faced by Hamas, for the movement has known from the outset that its own success is premised on the failure of Yasir Arafat's colossal gamble on accommodation with Israel. If Hamas remains an important player, it is largely because, in the five years since the historic handshake on the White House lawn in September 1993, the Oslo accords have yielded so little return to the Palestinians. Not only have hopes of peace and a just settlement been unfulfilled, but Palestinians have had to swallow the bitter pill of an embryonic government riddled with corruption and holding democracy and personal rights in flagrant contempt.

With the disappointments of the peace process, Hamas has been able to maintain popular support as the main opposition to Oslo. From its Muslim Brotherhood beginnings, it has emerged as a new Palestinian nationalist movement of Islamic hue. Indeed, it could be said to have followed in the footsteps of Fatah, whose founding fathers were either members of the Muslim Brotherhood or, like Arafat, closely connected to it, and to have taken on the discarded aims and methods of the PLO: the liberation of Palestine and armed struggle (though confined to Israel/Palestine).

But Hamas has not been able to bring about the official demise of Oslo nor to supplant the Palestinian leadership. On the contrary, the Palestinian

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Authority (PA) has succeeded through international agreements and other factors in becoming yet more firmly entrenched. And since the Wye Plantation accord of 23 October 1998, Hamas and the other Islamists have become the target of the U.S.-Israeli global "war against terrorism" into which Oslo has now been locked, and a serious effort to eliminate Hamas is underway.

TAKING ON THE PLO: UP TO THE OSLO ACCORDS

Hamas's emergence as a standard-bearer of national resistance was the result of a painful transformation within the Muslim Brotherhood from which it was born. The Brotherhood had traditionally stood aloof from the struggle against the occupation, for which it was rewarded during the 1970s with a cozy relationship with Israel. But when the intifada burst upon the Gaza Strip in December 1987, a radical change in approach was required, not least because the Brotherhood had also been losing in popularity to the smaller Islamic Jihad, whose acts of resistance against the occupation during the 1980s had done much to ignite the uprising. The Brotherhood had to reverse its priorities: its policy of "re-Islamizing" society, manifested in an impressive social and welfare network (which it used to compete with Fatah for the minds and hearts of the Palestinians), was henceforth insufficient, and it would now have to join the common struggle. The result was a separate, activist arm that it named Hamas, meaning "zeal," but also the acronym for the movement's official title, Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement).

The new movement quickly became an important political player. If the intifada had provided the initial challenge, the PLO's official embrace of the two-state solution launched by the November 1988 meeting of the Palestine National Council (PNC) in Algiers gave Hamas a precise political platform to combat. Armed with a new fighting image honed during the intifada, Hamas in its early years was able to make inroads at each nationalist reversal: the failure to reap any immediate gain from the PNC's dramatic initiative; popular disenchantment with PLO corruption and its hijacking of the intifada; the PLO's catastrophic policy in the Gulf War; and the faltering peace talks that followed the 1991 Madrid Conference.

In the five years leading up to the signing of the Oslo accords in September 1993, Hamas gradually mounted an unprecedented challenge to the PLO's exclusive claim to the leadership of the Palestinian people. The PLO responded by attempting to co-opt the movement. Evading incorporation became Hamas's next challenge, as was clear at the PNC's August 1991 session, when it ostensibly affirmed its readiness to join the PLO but attached conditions it knew to be unacceptable: rescinding recognition of UN Security Council Resolution 242 and an allocation of 40 percent of the PNC's seats. By October 1991, its support increasing, Hamas was ready with a concrete challenge to the peace process about to open in Madrid: it launched a ten-faction coalition that included the secular Popular and Democratic Fronts,

both members of the PLO, at a “counterconference” provocatively staged in Tehran.¹

Proof of how far Hamas had traveled came in December 1992. Its armed wing, the Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigades, most of whose operations in the early years, mainly stabbings and shootings, had a somewhat random nature,² now proved able to target Israel’s military establishment. In three separate attacks in the space of a week, it killed five Israeli soldiers and then kidnapped and killed a border guard. The result was the expulsion of more than 400 Islamists, most of them political figures associated with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to Marj al-Zuhur, Lebanon, on 17 December. Israel could not have dreamed up a better way of transforming the movement it feared into collective martyrs. The outrage unified the Palestinian people, forcing the PLO leadership to suspend the U.S.-sponsored peace talks with Israel for three months. The mass expulsion proved a failure for Israel in security as well as in political terms, since it did not isolate the Qassam Brigades. As a result, attacks on soldiers, settlers, and civilians increased throughout 1993, terrifying the Israelis and setting the stage for Oslo.

Hamas used its period in the wilderness of Marj al-Zuhur—which ended only in December 1993, when Israel was forced by international pressure to permit the 400 exiles’ return—to good effect, fundamentally rethinking its strategy and developing its public relations skills in response to its first sustained experience with international media attention. With its structure inside the occupied territories badly damaged, Hamas now made increasing use of its information office³ and political bureau, both established in late 1992 and located in Amman. Jordan had granted residence for this purpose to Imad Alami and Musa Abu Marzuq, Hamas’s most important operational leader.⁴ The movement’s charismatic founder and spiritual guide, Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, imprisoned in Israel since May 1989, played a powerful but more symbolic role, continuing to influence general strategy from his cell.

Abu Marzuq’s prominence reflected the movement’s shift from the early, fiercely Islamic rhetoric of its 1988 charter and its early communiqués to a more modern secular style. This did not mean, however, that Hamas’s original leadership, mainly shaykhs and religious leaders, disappeared or lost influence. Rather, the movement was reinforced by a new generation of technicians and professionals better able to engage with the outside world in its own language and to reflect the movement’s enhanced status within the Palestinian arena. It should further be noted that all the top Hamas leadership—shaykhs and technocrats alike—had originally been members of the Muslim Brotherhood. And if the weight of the leadership shifted during this period in the direction of the “outside” (specifically, Amman), the organization’s membership remained firmly rooted in the West Bank and Gaza, where Hamas was win-

In 1993, the movement was reinforced by a new generation of professionals better able to engage with the outside world and to reflect the movement’s enhanced status.

ning new support from businessmen and professionals from the urban middle class.

Abu Marzuq was a key player in a series of urgent meetings between Hamas and the PLO following the December expulsion. However, in January 1993 it became clear, at an acrimonious meeting in Khartoum, that no deal was to be struck: Hamas vigorously rejected the PLO's claim to sole representation of the Palestinian people and repeated its demands for 40 percent of PNC seats, revocation of PLO acceptance of Resolution 242, and an end to the peace talks with Israel.⁵

THE PA, A NEW REALITY

Oslo, largely the result of the challenge from Hamas, changed the political map, creating a new dynamic. However bitterly Hamas opposed the peace process, the 1994 establishment of the PA and the introduction of "autonomy" in Gaza and Jericho were unassailable. According to opinion polls,⁶ the Palestinians inside the occupied territories—in sharp contrast to the diaspora—collectively endorsed the peace process and, despite deep disappointments, largely continued to see no alternative to Oslo. This being the case, Hamas knew that it must avoid accusations of splitting the Palestinian people. It was thus that the movement did not openly challenge the PA, even though its aim of overturning the Oslo accords implicitly called the PA leadership into question.

Military operations, though Hamas's ultimate weapon, also became more problematic as a result of Oslo. Not only was the *modus vivendi* with the PA based on Hamas's compliance with the PA's basic demand for a cessation of violence in and from the areas of self-rule, but Hamas also had to take into account the often volatile public mood. Thus, even though it adopted a policy of tying military operations to Israeli outrages, mass anger at Israel could quickly be overshadowed by the effects of collective punishment. Another difficulty, acknowledged privately by leaders of both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, was restraining the fervor of a young generation that had grown up during the intifada, nurtured on the notion of armed struggle. In addition, a concerted response to the changed Palestinian reality was made more difficult by the imprisonment of many of Hamas's leading figures by Israel and subsequently (as of late 1994) by the PA; continuing Israeli occupation (mainly in the West Bank); and the geographical spread of its leadership over the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the "outside"—areas that have historically known very different circumstances.⁷

At the time of the signing of the Oslo accords, Hamas set itself up as the champion of resistance to Arafat's "sell-out of Palestine" through *jihad* and reiterated calls to resume the spent intifada. At the same time, however, its most influential figures were farsighted enough to see the implications of the new situation and to introduce new elements into the debate: the gradualist "policy of stages" inherited from the Muslim Brothers offered scope for quite

considerable pragmatism. Thus, in November 1993, within two months of Oslo, Shaykh Yasin wrote an open letter from prison⁸ in which he raised the possibility of a cease-fire of ten or even twenty years with Israel if Israel would withdraw from the occupied territories. Citing the example of the Islamic Movement in Israel, which takes part in municipal elections under Israeli occupation (and, since 1996, in general elections), he also suggested “challenging the legislative institution from within” by participating in the electoral process planned for establishing an autonomous Palestinian Council. He encouraged his followers to oppose the Palestinian-Israeli accord “by all possible civilized means,” a formula understood to signal recognition of the framework of the future Palestinian Authority and to encourage limiting armed resistance.

But such moderation was undermined by events. On 25 February 1994, an Israeli settler, Baruch Goldstein, killed more than thirty-five Palestinian worshippers and wounded some 200 others in the Ibrahim mosque in Hebron. Hamas could not but respond to the outrage shared by all Palestinians. In a leaflet entitled “The settlers will pay for the massacre with the blood of their hearts,” the organization vowed to avenge the deaths by taking “a life for a life.” The violence, now directed—significantly—not at military but at civilian targets inside Israel’s Green Line, was without precedent,⁹ all the more ominous for Israel because of the perpetrators’ willingness to lay down their lives for Palestine. Five suicide attacks followed during the next eight months: Afula (7 April), Hadera (14 April), Ramla (26 August), West Jerusalem (9 October), and the Dizengoff center in Tel Aviv (19 October). The Israeli toll was 35 people dead and more than 135 injured.

Even after the first attacks had been carried out, Shaykh Yasin’s message signaling the leadership’s moderate orientation was confirmed by Musa Abu Marzuq in a landmark press interview¹⁰ that seemed to acknowledge the irreversibility of Oslo.¹¹ He affirmed that if Israel withdrew from the occupied territories and dismantled its settlements, “there could be a truce to give the enemy government an opportunity to get out of the deadlock” in which the peace process was stuck because of the “wrong basis” on which it was launched. He added that Hamas had no qualms about PLO police, international forces, or even the Jordanian or Egyptian authorities supervising the territories after an Israeli withdrawal. Hamas would cooperate with any Palestinian bodies established in evacuated areas and would take part in any free elections in the territories to choose a Palestinian leadership. The movement would even participate in local self-rule bodies provided it was not prevented from expressing the genuine aspirations of the Palestinian people.

With Hamas’s attacks on Israeli targets and Arafat’s arrival in Gaza in July 1994, the PA was under great pressure from Israel to crack down on the Islamists. Inside Gaza, tensions from the operations were already high when the Qassam Brigades kidnapped an Israeli soldier, Nahshon Wachsmann,¹² in the West Bank on 9 October 1994, demanding as ransom the release of Hamas prisoners, including Shaykh Yasin. Israel demanded that Arafat take



Some 20,000 Hamas supporters attend a rally in Gaza City on 26 November 1994 to protest the use of deadly force against Palestinians by the PA and Israel. (Reuters/Jim Hollander/Archive Photos)

immediate action. Escalating the repression to the highest level since it had taken office, the PA arrested 400 Hamas activists in the Gaza Strip, including one of its cofounders, Ibrahim Yazuri.

Pressure from Israel was compounded by a history of factional infighting between Fatah and Hamas, making it increasingly problematic for Arafat to secure an Islamist pledge not to engage in acts of violence in areas of Palestinian autonomy. From 1990 on, there had been sporadic clashes between the two factions both in the West Bank (particularly Nablus and Tulkarm) and in Gaza. After a moratorium in April 1994 on collaborator killings¹³—which had constituted the bulk of the Gaza killings until 1992—Hamas decided to flex its muscles at the PA by killing two more collaborators in June and July.¹⁴ This was followed by the Islamic Jihad's killing of three Israeli soldiers on 11 November 1994—significantly, within the Gaza Strip—to avenge the death of Islamic Jihad leader Hani Abed, almost certainly at the hands of the Israeli authorities.

The grave crisis between the Islamists and the PA that followed erupted in a bloody clash at Gaza's Palestine Mosque on 18 November and seemed to presage the possibility of a civil war. The Palestinian police lost control, killing 14 people and wounding 270. Hamas emerged from the confrontation with great credit on account of its ability to restrain its followers. But its posi-

tion was soon undermined as Arafat changed the rules of the game: by withdrawing PA officials (the police) and mobilizing Fatah, he turned the conflict into a factional one between Hamas and Fatah—a conflict in which Hamas declined to engage. The event could be seen as the point at which Hamas's strength began to ebb, outmaneuvered by Arafat in its Gaza home.

A second flash point came on 2 April 1995 when a large explosion demolished half a building in the Shaykh Radwan district of Gaza City, killing seven, including a leading activist in the Qassam Brigades, Kamal Kahil,¹⁵ wanted both by the Israelis and the PA. The PA accused Hamas of callously building a bomb factory in the heart of one of Gaza's most densely populated areas, while Hamas held "the Arafat authority and the Zionists . . . responsible for the killings" and threatened that "the Qassam Units will respond quickly and painfully to the criminal bombing of the building."¹⁶ Whatever the truth of the matter, there was widespread belief that there had been PA connivance.¹⁷ Coming as it did after the Palestine Mosque affair, the killings were seen as a further show of strength on the part of Arafat against Hamas.

Retribution was sharp and swift. Exactly one week after the explosion, suicide bombers of Hamas and Islamic Jihad struck within two hours of each other near two Israeli settlements in Gaza, killing eight people and injuring more than forty. Islamic Jihad's military wing called its attack a "heroic suicidal operation" and a "gift to the souls of the martyrs of the criminal Shaykh Radwan massacre," while Hamas issued a communiqué urging Israeli settlers to leave the Gaza Strip "before they are buried in its soil."¹⁸ The PA arrested 200 Islamists, ordered all factions to hand in their weapons, and activated its State Security Court for the first time, which held secret nighttime sittings¹⁹ to hand down harsh sentences on the Islamists. (Three members of Islamic Jihad received 15-to-25-year sentences.) Jordan also agreed to a crackdown on Hamas activities there—its most far-reaching act being the expulsion of Musa Abu Marzuq.

THE ELUSIVE "DIALOGUE OF EQUALS"

The effects of the new dynamic were becoming apparent. Hamas's Gaza leadership, intent on averting more crises that risked leading to civil war, agreed to take part in an interfactional dialogue with the PA. It could bear the Authority's arrests of its members—conducted as a "revolving door policy" in which its political figures would be regularly picked up and then quietly released—but if Hamas were to make its weight felt in Gaza, it would have to act alongside the PA.

The Gaza wing's moderate stance was facilitated by the emergence, with Palestinian self-rule, of a new generation of Hamas politicians. The "intifada graduates," in their thirties and early forties, had been educated in Palestinian universities and had shared schoolrooms, as well as prison cells, with their Fatah counterparts. More attuned to the secular nationalist discourse and fre-

quently with direct lines to PA officials, this younger, highly pragmatic generation was used by Hamas in its dialogue with the PA. In the absence of Hamas's top Gaza leader, the more hard-line 'Abd al-'Aziz Rantisi, imprisoned in Israel,²⁰ new faces such as Ahmad Bahhar, Sayyid Abu Musamih, Ghazi Hamad, Isma'il Haniyya, Khalid al-Hindi, and Imad al-Faluji emerged alongside Gaza's long-standing spokesman, Mahmud Zahhar.

But while the younger generation was in the vanguard, the Gaza leadership by and large was unified: the presence of the PA had made it embrace a pragmatism that increasingly set it apart from the rest of the movement. Unlike its leadership "outside" Palestine, Hamas in Gaza had to live with the PA.

In general, the concerns of the Gaza leaders were to preserve the movement's political gains, its institutions (the Islamic University and the numerous social, charitable, youth, and educational institutions), and control of half of Gaza's mosques. They demanded a "dialogue of equals" taking account of the place Hamas had won in Palestinian society and sought to establish a common agenda at the practical level of state building. In particular, they hoped to play a role in health and education as well as in security (in order to help prevent any crossing of "red lines" that could result in a loss of control over young supporters).²¹ Finally, they wanted to establish a political party as a vehicle for Hamas to run in the Palestinian legislative elections envisioned under Oslo. Such views were aired in the new newspapers that began publication as of September 1994 (even if they would be periodically suspended): *al-Watan* for Hamas (replaced in January 1997 by *al-Risala*) and *al-Istiqlal* for the Islamic Jihad.

The movement was relaxing in a number of ways. Directives on Islamic codes of conduct and morality were now reserved for the privacy of mosques and meetings. But at least one of the changes for which Hamas sought credit—dropping insistence on the *hijab*, previously worn by almost all women in Gaza either as a symbol of the intifada or out of fear of Hamas—was in fact the result of a PA liberalization of the dress code.

Significantly, the Gaza leadership's moderation did not extend to its position on *jihad*. In line with the movement's consensus on this issue, there could be no agreement to end armed resistance without Israel's withdrawal from the whole of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; the evacuation of all settlements; and the right to a Palestinian state in those areas. It is true that the Gaza leadership was later to observe—tacitly and for a limited duration—a halt to military action in and from the autonomous areas as the basis for establishing a modus vivendi with the PA. However, such an undertaking could not become part of its official agenda. While Israel still occupied most of the West Bank and, indeed, 42 percent of Gaza, this stand met with wide support in Gaza beyond the factional divide.

IN SEARCH OF LEADERSHIP

Divergences within the movement, particularly between Gaza and the “outside,” which had been developing since Oslo—aided and abetted in no small measure by the PA—became increasingly obvious with the challenge of legislative elections set for January 1996, following the signing of the Taba agreement (Oslo II) in September 1995. The PA was eager for Hamas to participate in order to involve the movement in the Oslo process and to increase its own legitimacy. Conditions in Gaza were eased, the ban on *al-Watan* was lifted, and Hamas negotiated a sixteen-point agreement with the Authority, leaked by the PA²² but denied by Hamas. The understanding behind the text was that the PA would treat Hamas as a bona fide political opposition and influence Israel to stop hunting down Hamas fugitives in return for the movement’s commitment not to “embarrass” the Authority. The outcome was an undeclared moratorium on armed attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad from September 1995 to February 1996.

The Gaza leadership, in line with its objectives discussed above, supported running in the elections. Three Gaza moderates²³ arranged a meeting with the outside leadership in Khartoum on 4 October, but failed to win the agreement of their outside counterparts. A second meeting in Khartoum²⁴ was followed by talks with the PA in Cairo from 20 to 23 December. No agreement was reached, but the understanding continued.

Having failed to secure a consensus within the movement, the three Gazans who had instigated the first Khartoum meeting pulled out of the race at the last minute, while Imad al-Faluji (who had been expelled from the movement on account of his overly close relations with the PA) ran as an independent Islamist. Discussions on a Hamas political party, Hizb al-Khallas al-Islami (the Islamic Salvation Party), were shelved, and the party was only launched once the elections were safely out of the way.

Hamas gained little from its indecisiveness over the elections. Ambivalence over how best to live with Oslo was compounded by the movement’s failure to rally support on issues not addressed by Oslo—settlements, Jerusalem, roads, prisoners. With opinion polls showing only 10 percent support,²⁵ the movement was also accused of seeking to avoid a poor showing in the elections, preferring to wait for local elections in which it could expect better results. Against the outside leadership’s wishes, half the movement’s supporters went to the polls anyway, and Hamas sympathizers (including Faluji, whom the PA rewarded with a ministry) won seven of the eighty-eight seats on the Palestinian Council. Having fulfilled its promise of maintaining calm during the election period, Hamas was now rewarded with permission to open an official bureau in Gaza City.

Though Gaza-Amman tensions died down following the elections, the root causes remained very much intact. The Gaza branch had had to accommodate itself to the new reality of the PA. The outside leadership, on the

other hand, lacking a political and social base (since Hamas operates only inside Palestine), was not affected by the same constraints and was not

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under pressure to make concessions in its ideology of the pre-Oslo period. Meanwhile, the PA lost no opportunity to magnify these differences, regularly accusing Hamas, and particularly its outside leaders, of “working with foreign powers”—usually meaning Iran. As if the differing conditions were not enough, the unity of the movement was threatened

by a leadership vacuum, with Shaykh Yasin and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Rantisi still in Israeli jails and Abu Marzuq now imprisoned in the United States.²⁶ Had he remained in Jordan, Abu Marzuq, especially, might well have prevented the Amman-Gaza rift from getting out of hand.

The West Bank leaders, for their part, though historically closer to Jordan than to Gaza,²⁷ were totally isolated from both²⁸ as well as from each other: indeed, with Israeli redeployment, the West Bank had become increasingly fragmented into small enclaves of self-rule. The leaders had no common stance on the elections, for example, with some favoring participation and others following the more hard-line position of Amman. The leadership situation in the West Bank was aptly summed up by Shaykh Bassam Jarrar, one of the West Bank’s leading Islamist thinkers (although he distances himself from Hamas), who noted that there was

no centralized leadership in the West Bank and no decisions common to the West Bank and Gaza. Here, it’s a case of everyone deciding for himself. . . . Things are easier in Gaza because, at the end of the day, Israel’s plans don’t include Gaza. It makes it easier for Hamas to open a dialogue with the PA or stop military operations. But Hamas is bigger than the Gaza Strip.²⁹

The air of confusion and uncertainty surrounding Hamas positions around the time of the elections was to crystallize during the coming year in an open contest for supremacy between Gaza “doves” and outside “hawks”—a contest that would grow into the most serious crisis in the history of the movement.

HAMAS’S DARKEST HOURS

The crisis was triggered by the killing of the Qassam Brigade’s chief bomb-maker, Yahya Ayyash, known as the Engineer, on 5 January 1996 in the heart of autonomous Gaza in an attack recognized as the work of Mossad. This followed the assassination of Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shiqaqi in Malta on 26 October of the previous year. Despite the provocation, Hamas had held to its word, maintaining calm during the period of the elections.

Nonetheless, there were two deaths to avenge—deaths that had caused immense anger among Palestinians of all persuasions. Ayyash's funeral was attended by nearly a hundred thousand people—the largest gathering in Gaza's history.

The Islamists struck with four suicide bombings, from 25 February to 4 March 1996, which claimed fifty-eight lives in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The attacks put Arafat under unprecedented pressure to destroy Hamas and Islamic Jihad, root and branch. Some 1,200 suspected Islamists were arrested, the Islamic University and some thirty Hamas institutions were raided, and the Gaza mosques were put under PA control³⁰—where they remain today. The notorious torture of detainees in Palestinian custody began. Meanwhile, Israel reinforced its long closure on the territories, with disastrous consequences for the Palestinian people.

The confusion that followed the attacks highlighted an unprecedented disarray within the movement. On 3 March, an unknown group calling itself the Students of Yahya Ayyash claimed responsibility for the first three attacks—the fourth having been claimed by Islamic Jihad—and called on their “brother who signed [a previous] statement from Izzeddin al-Qassam calling for a cease-fire to immediately stop distributing these tracts.”³¹ The following day, a statement signed Izzeddin al-Qassam ordered its units in Gaza and the West Bank to “immediately and absolutely obey the central decisions taken by the Qassam leadership to halt martyrdom attacks against the Jews.”³² That same day, the Gaza leadership held a crisis meeting with the PA, followed on 5 March by a press conference in which two of the movement's founding members, Ibrahim Yazuri and Muhammad Shamma'a, appealed for a halt to the attacks. Shortly before his arrest on 8 March, Gaza's Hamas spokesman, Mahmud Zahhar, denied Gaza's responsibility for the operations and hinted at the involvement of Hamas's outside leadership.³³ And indeed, on 10 March, Hamas's representative in Jordan, Muhammad Nazzal, declared that Hamas had *not* taken a political decision to stop or suspend attacks against Israel.³⁴ That same day, the “Qassam General Command” warned of more bombings.

After two months of speculation, it emerged that Gaza elements of the Izzeddin al-Qassam had earlier reached an agreement with PA security chief Muhammad Dahlan to freeze all armed operations. The Gaza political leadership was apparently not party to the deal, even if *de facto* it would not have been against a freeze. But the outside leadership opposed the accord, as did segments of the Qassam Brigades themselves. Drawing on the disarray and the intense emotion following the Ayyash killing, a number of Qassam elements (such as Ibrahim Maqadma and activists close to him) took it upon themselves to avenge the death.³⁵

What is beyond dispute is that the attacks further soured relations within Hamas even as Israel's closure of the territories caused people to blame the movement. And since the circumstances were not known, the Gaza leader-

ship did not escape blame. Ghazi Hamad, editor of the Hamas daily *al-Watan* and a prominent political figure, was quite blunt:

Continuous military operations do not help Hamas: in fact they have a grave and damaging effect on the movement. We don't want the Palestinians to blame Hamas for their suffering, nor are we looking for a confrontation with the Palestinian Authority. We're ready to talk to them. The cessation of our armed actions will be part of an overall agreement with the Authority. And as soon as we get travel permits, we'll be ready to go and discuss the matter with the outside leadership in Amman.³⁶

The terrible repercussions of the bombings jolted many within the organization into seeing the need to shore up divisions within their ranks. West Bank leaders, many emerging from Israeli prisons and themselves now faced with the new situation created by autonomy in the cities, began to urge coordination with the Gaza wing in dealing with the PA. According to Jamil Hamami, the movement's leading West Bank dove and by his own account a founder of Hamas in the West Bank in early 1988, "No matter who is in control of our military wing, they are subject to political decisions." In his view, "the inside leaders [should] have the final word. . . . They're better able to evaluate the situation than their counterparts outside," and the leaders of the Gaza and Amman camps were "reasonable enough to prevent a real split." At the end of the day, "the new reality created by the Israeli-Palestinian accords is of [a] greater moment than the Islamist movement itself."³⁷

THE LEADERS RESTORED

A first sign that Hamas's fortunes might be on the upturn following the low point reached during the February–March operations came in the spring of 1997. On 20 April, Rantisi returned to Gaza after having been released from three years in Israeli jails. And scarcely two weeks later, on 5 May, Abu Marzuq returned to Amman after he won his two-year battle against extradition to Israel, and the United States dropped proceedings against him. Hamas's top operational leadership was back in place.

Abu Marzuq, the movement's most influential leader, and Rantisi, Hamas's number one in Gaza, both sharing a centrist position in terms of the movement overall,³⁸ were together able to effect a rapprochement between the Amman and Gaza wings. They forged a consensus on three key points. First, there would be no conflict with or retaliation against the PA. Second, armed action would be retaliatory only and in principle directed only against soldiers and settlers.³⁹ Third, Hamas would strive to transform itself into a regional player supported both diplomatically and even financially by Arab and Muslim powers.

The consensus was given added impetus as a result of a moment of great good fortune for Hamas. On 25 September 1997, Mossad bungled an assassination attempt on Khalid Mishal, the head of Hamas's political bureau in Amman. The fiasco had the immediate consequence of obliging Israel, anxious not to compromise its good relations with King Hussein, to release Shaykh Yasin to Jordan, on 1 October.

Ten years of imprisonment and multiple physical handicaps had not dimmed Shaykh Yasin's ability to seize the moment and act as the public face of the movement. Immediately upon his release, he met with the Amman-based leadership, returning to Gaza five days later. After basking in the acclaim of his return home,⁴⁰ the frail quadriplegic embarked on a triumphant four-month tour (from 19 February to 24 June 1998) to strengthen the movement's regional support, visiting Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Syria, the UAE, and Yemen. His warm reception by heads of state (matched in some instances by pledges of donations) was an indication of the Arab and Muslim worlds' growing opposition to the deadlocked peace process, and his welcome in Kuwait and Syria was a decided rebuff to Arafat. Yasin made the most of extensive media coverage beamed across the region, while the Palestinian press remained muzzled back home.

Shaykh Yasin had already clarified Hamas's priorities and directions. In his freshly decorated but modest home in the Sabra quarter of Gaza City, he stressed the need for improving relations with the PA, noting that "we are one nation. We're fighting the same goal, and we have one enemy, so we've no choice but to unite."⁴¹ On the subject of armed resistance, he reemphasized the retaliatory nature of Hamas attacks. While conceding that "both Islam and international law" prohibit attacks on civilians, he stressed that Israel had been "the first to violate these laws" and that since the Palestinians are the victims, "it's our right to treat them in the same way that they treat us. So I'm asking the whole world to call on Israel to stop attacking our civilians, and, if they do, we'll reciprocate. It's their decision." And, while he declared that in terms of operations "the military people make their own decisions" and that "we have no advance knowledge of military operations," he noted that "we political leaders lay down the general lines"—a point that Abu Marzuq forcefully emphasized.⁴²

Shaykh Yasin laid considerable stress on Hamas's conditions for ending its armed operations. "If a Palestinian state is established," he said, "our violence will end." More specifically, he spelled out Hamas's conditions for a truce,⁴³ including Israeli withdrawal from all Palestinian lands it has occupied since 1967, the dismantling of all settlements, the release of all Palestinian and Arab prisoners, and noninterference in Palestinian internal affairs after the establishment of an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital. If Israel refused such conditions, he added, it would be responsible for whatever disturbances take place.

But while Hamas had made great strides in closing its ranks and reasserting itself as a political force to be reckoned with, outside events were leading

in another direction. On 29 March 1998, Izzeddin al-Qassam leader Muhieddin Sharif (the Engineer No. 2) was assassinated in Ramallah, provoking the worst crisis since the “root and branch” assault on Hamas after the 1996 suicide bombings. Amid initial accusations on all sides, Rantisi held Israel directly or indirectly responsible for the killing and was “expecting revenge . . . by the military wing of Hamas.”⁴⁴ After Israeli threats of “unprecedentedly grave consequences” if Hamas resorted to violence, a lightning PA investigation “found” the killing to be the result of a “power struggle” within the Qassam Brigades. Yet another crackdown on Hamas ensued, with armored personnel carriers rolled menacingly onto the streets of Gaza and the detention, yet again, of Rantisi. Despite the Palestinian High Court’s order to release him, he remains in prison at the time of this writing (March 1999).

The targeting of the Qassam Brigades leadership did not end with the liquidation of Muhieddin Sharif. On 11 September 1998, two more top Qassam leaders, the brothers Imad and Adil Awadallah, were killed by Israeli security forces in Hebron. The Awadallah affair is as murky as that of Sharif, with persistent suspicions of PA connivance and claims that the Likud government may have sought to provoke retaliation by Hamas (in a rerun of the Ayyash killing, which unquestionably contributed to Likud’s electoral victory in 1996). In any event, Israel imposed yet another closure on the autonomous enclaves. Shaykh Yasin convened a meeting the day after the killings, declaring that “our response will come soon,” Islamists in the West Bank took to the streets, and there were clashes with the IDF and PA security forces. With the Awadallahs’ deaths, three of Hamas’s top military leaders had been eliminated, with only Muhammad Dayf remaining at large. By the time the Wye agreement was signed, the Qassam Brigades—and hence Hamas—had already been gravely weakened.

FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL?

Hopes that an accommodation could eventually be reached with the PA that would preserve overall unity in the Palestinian ranks seemed to end with the signing of the Wye memorandum on 23 October 1998. Despite the fact that there had been no operations in more than a year, the agreement made further phased Israeli redeployment conditional upon PA measures against “terrorist groups” and their infrastructure—measures that could include the elimination of charitable, educational, youth, and other institutions associated with the Islamist movement.

Within a week of the Wye agreement, on 29 October, a failed suicide bombing near Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip, in which the Hamas driver and an IDF soldier were killed,⁴⁵ resulted in the arrest of some 300 Hamas activists, including leading political figures such as Mahmud Zahhar, Ahmad Bahhar, and Sayyid Abu Musamih. A 1 November communiqué signed Izzeddin al-Qassam, threatening to attack PA officers if the repression continued, was denounced by Hamas leaders (outside as well as inside) and was seen as a

warning not only to Arafat but also to Hamas's internal leadership not to end armed struggle. On 6 November an abortive attack by Islamic Jihad in West Jerusalem was met by arrests of Jihad cadres throughout the West Bank and the closure of a kindergarten in Bethlehem run by a female Jihad member and former prisoner. Meanwhile, Shaykh Yasin, who had vowed to continue armed resistance, had been put under house arrest for two months (29 October–23 December 1999). And Shaykh Bitawi, a senior Islamist figure whose acceptance of the post of deputy grand judge had signaled closer Hamas coordination with the PA, was arrested for declaring the Wye agreement "an act of treason." By January, some 1,100 Palestinians (mostly Islamists) were under PA detention, most without charge or trial.⁴⁶

Whether crushing Hamas can provide the cast-iron security Israel seeks is a moot point. The destruction of its infrastructure cannot prevent attacks by elements driven underground. The region is awash with arms, and there is no shortage of young men ready for sacrifice. Moreover, to "take out" Hamas, as the Wye agreement requires, would call for measures on a scale that could not but translate into dangerous political instability. Large segments of the Palestinian population, whether or not they agree with Hamas, have deep sympathy for and identification with the movement.

Arafat is well aware of this and knows there is a limit he dare not overstep; hence his permitting widespread protests in January and February 1999 and his apparent acquiescence on 15 February in demands by the Palestinian Council to set up a committee—albeit under Frayh Abu-Madayn—to monitor implementation of a PA prisoner release. Since Wye, Arafat has indicated that any continued political role for Hamas may be conditioned on its behavior: if it desists from outright opposition (political as well as military) to the PA's agenda, it may be allowed to continue its social and welfare activities. Yet it is Hamas's opposition—championing Palestinian resistance to Oslo—that has been the basis of the support it has built up over the years.

How can Hamas respond to this assault? How could it retain its internal cohesion if it were reduced to the role of a domesticated "loyal" opposition, along the lines of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood? Its immediate task to assure its survival is to try to rally support in the Arab and Muslim worlds (and here its outside leadership is of paramount importance). It needs to reach not just the countries already opposed to Oslo, such as Iran and Syria (where Shaykh Yasin addressed a large rally and which has recently been showing renewed interest in Hamas), but also to countries within the U.S. ambit, such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. In Hamas's favor in securing a regional role in the post-Arafat era is the fact that as long as there is no progress toward a settlement that meets Palestinian aspirations, it will remain the only credible opposition voice within the Palestinian arena.

Hamas and the Palestinians have reached an impasse: on the one hand, they face a short-term freeze until Israel's elections in May 1999, when the future direction of Oslo/Wye may become apparent; on the other, they face a pause—no doubt of longer duration—while all sides wait (and plan) for the

succession to Arafat. If Hamas can survive U.S./Israeli/PA plans for its destruction, the Islamist strategy of stages will make it easier to bide its time. Its Muslim Brotherhood roots make it flexible, able to defer its particular goals "for the coming generations" and wait for the time, not many years away, when the demographic balance will swing in the Palestinians' favor.

NOTES

1. The coalition was formalized as the Palestinian Forces' Alliance in response to Oslo in 1994.

2. The Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigades, which replaced Hamas's two existing activist wings, al-Majd and al-Mujahidun, launched its activities in April 1989 with the kidnapping and killing of two Israeli soldiers. It first came to public notice when it escalated its attacks on soldiers and settlers in the so-called war of the knives following the 8 October 1990 atrocity at the al-Aqsa Mosque, when Israeli soldiers killed seventeen worshippers and wounded hundreds more. Nonetheless, most of the attacks attributed to—and claimed by—Hamas during this period were random.

3. Ibrahim Ghawshah, Hamas's Jordan-based official spokesman, who had been active as of 1989, together with Muhammad Siam, became head of this office. (Interview with Ghawshah, 20 February 1999.)

4. Hamas's militant activities have created an obvious need for secrecy, which, added to the highly flexible decentralized structure inherited from the Brotherhood, makes it difficult to gather concrete data on many aspects of the movement, including its political structure and funding.

5. See *al-Safir*, 2 February 1993, for the proceedings of this meeting, held between Yasir Arafat and Salim al-Zanun for the PLO and Musa Abu Marzuq and Ibrahim Ghawshah for Hamas, from 2 to 4 January 1993.

6. The Jerusalem Media and Communication Center's Poll no. 7 of June 1995 on Palestinian attitudes toward a year of autonomy showed that 69.7 percent of Gazans and West Bankers supported it, 74.9 percent supported its extension to the West Bank, and 57.9 percent were optimistic for the future. For Gaza alone, support levels were higher: respectively, 78 percent, 81.4 percent, and 68.1 percent. The Nablus-based Center for Pales-

tine Research and Studies (CPRS) showed slightly higher levels of support.

7. The movement's decentralized nature has also inclined its members to give their own opinions on Hamas policy—often wrongly construed as an official position.

8. Published in *al-Wasat*, 1 November 1993.

9. In moving to armed resistance, Hamas had modeled itself on Islamic Jihad, with which it closely coordinates its military operations. It uses a loose, highly secretive structure of cells, which are hard to penetrate. The Hebron massacre marked the start of a concerted policy to use violence in retaliation for Israeli outrages. For maximum effect and also to avoid embarrassing the PA, many attacks have been directed inside the Green Line. Soldiers and settlers are the preferred targets although, with events such as the Hebron assault on Muslim worshippers, this structure has been relaxed.

10. *al-Sabil*, 19 April 1994.

11. Hamas realized that the repercussions of the al-Ibrahimi Mosque killings prompted Israel to waste no more time in installing the Palestinian Authority for fear that it would lose its ability to rule.

12. Wachsmann was killed in an abortive Israeli rescue attempt on 14 October.

13. This followed an understanding in October 1993 that there would be no conflict between prisoners and factions over Oslo.

14. Former collaborators were given amnesty in an annex to the May 1994 Cairo agreement.

15. Kahil was wanted by the PA for the killing of over thirty collaborators and by the Israeli authorities for the murder of Lieutenant Colonel Meir Mintz in December 1993, the highest ranking Israeli officer to have died during the intifada.

16. Interview with Abu Muhammad Mustafa, Hamas representative in Damascus, 2 April 1995.

17. Among other things, the PA withheld the bodies of the victims from their families; failed to explain the disappearance of a key Hamas witness, Nidal Dababish; and arrested a journalist, Tahir Nunu, who queried the PA's version of events in the daily *al-Nahar*.

18. *Palestine Report* 8, no. 14 (16 April 1995).

19. Formed in February 1995 by presidential decree, the State Security Court's nighttime trials sometimes lasted only minutes; defendants were not told they were to be tried; defendants were assigned to military officers to provide their defense; and there was no right of appeal. (Amnesty International, September 1998 report.)

20. Rantisi, spokesman for the deportees in Marj al-Zuhur, was rearrested almost immediately upon his return from south Lebanon.

21. Some also wanted to expand the Hamas charter to include articles about the PA and the Islamic political party they were hoping to form, but recognized the difficulties given the movement's decentralized structure and the need for such decisions to be approved by all of Hamas's branches.

22. *al-Hayat*, 12 October 1995.

23. Khalid al-Hindi, Abdallah Mahanna, and Said al-Nimruti.

24. The Khartoum trips had been sponsored by the PA, eager to secure Hamas's participation in the elections.

25. The 10 percent was a low point, reflecting popular hopes following Taba and Israeli redeployment from West Bank towns. Normally, Hamas support as registered in opinion polls averaged about 13 percent. For instance, CPRS cited it at 13.8 percent in February 1994 (compared to 41.6 percent for Fatah); 12.3 percent in May 1995 (49.2 percent for Fatah); and 16.6 percent in August–September 1995 (43.2 percent for Fatah). Jerusalem Media and Communication Center (JMCC) cited Hamas support at 14.2 percent in January 1994; 10.8 percent in July 1994; 18.2 percent in June 1995, dropping to 10.7 percent in October 1995 following the Taba agreement.

It should be mentioned, however, that many observers believe that the polls have consistently underestimated Hamas's support, which may be more accurately reflected in local election results (profes-

sional and student organizations, etc.), where the movement consistently pulled in 30–40 percent of the vote in the two years leading up to the January 1996 elections.

26. Arriving in New York following his expulsion from Jordan, Abu Marzuq was promptly seized at the airport and held for the next two years on terrorism charges.

27. After 1948, the West Bank Muslim Brothers became part of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, while those in Gaza fell under that of the Egyptian Brotherhood. These differing loyalties continued long after Israeli occupation theoretically unified them in 1967, and the West Bank's greater affinity to Jordan remained the case even during the intifada and after Palestinian self-rule in Gaza.

28. The extent of their isolation is clear in the controversy surrounding the relationship of Hamas to the Brotherhood. While the "official" Hamas line emerging both in Amman and Gaza maintains that Hamas has supplanted the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine (as confirmed by Abu Marzuq in an interview, 25 November 1997), the West Bank Islamists still differentiate between the two movements. Many, while affirming support for Hamas, deny belonging to the organization at all (possibly out of fear of Israel), whereas some call for a return to the Brotherhood. (Interviews with Shaykh Hamid Bitawi and Shaykh Jamil Salim, 8 July 1996.)

29. Interview with Shaykh Bassam Jarar, 5 July 1996.

30. Amnesty International, September 1998 report.

31. Agence France-Presse, 3 March 1996.

32. *Mideast Mirror*, 5 March 1996.

33. "The assessment of those of us who are living here is different from people outside. [They] receive their information from television reports or telephone calls; we live the fine details and our assessment is much more realistic." *Sunday Times*, London, 10 March 1996.

34. *al-Hayat*, 10 March 1996.

35. The PA has maintained that the units responsible for the February–March operations were organized by the outside leadership, but the entire episode still needs to be treated with caution.

36. Interview with Ghazi Hamad, 24 August 1996.

37. Interview with Jamil Hamami, 9 July 1996. Shaykh Hamami was expelled from Hamas by the Amman office for getting too close to the PA, though his dismissal was rejected both in Gaza and the West Bank. (Interview with Ibrahim Ghosheh, 26 November 1997.)

38. Rantisi, while a relative hard-liner within the Gaza branch, was a centrist in relation to the movement as a whole.

39. While the organization could not rule out attacks inside the self-rule areas given the presence even there of Israeli soldiers and settlers, there was implicit agreement to refrain from such attacks. Arafat had made it clear that attacks on civilians constituted a red line.

40. Yasin's release was followed by a short, sharp rise in support for Hamas: JMCC's opinion poll of 19 December 1997 registered 17.3 percent, up from 11.3 percent in its July poll. The movement also did well in student council elections that winter both at al-Najjah University (40 out of 81 seats—5 seats more than Fatah) and at Birzeit (winning 20 seats, compared to Fatah's 19, and almost 40 percent of the vote).

41. Interview with Shaykh Yasin, Gaza City, 20 November 1997.

42. Referring to a 28 September 1997 Qassam Brigades leaflet threatening violence outside Palestine in retaliation for the Mishal attack, Abu Marzuq declared, "They know they can't go outside Palestine. . . . They understand Hamas policy, particularly in the light of what Yasin has said about a truce." (Interview, 25 November 1997.)

43. Two days before the abortive attack on Mishal, Jordan had sent Israel a conditional cease-fire offer, purportedly from Hamas. Hamas denied involvement but was quick to claim, in spokesman Ibrahim Ghawshah's words, that "the initiative by King Hussein concerns Israel and Hamas directly and means the PLO is not the only representative of the Palestinians." (Interview, 26 November 1997.)

44. IMRA Review (Independent Media Review and Analysis), Kfar Sava, 1 April 1998, submitted to MSA News at <http://msanews.mynet.net>.

45. The Hamas jeep was intercepted just before ramming into a settler bus full of school children. Three other IDF soldiers were also wounded.

46. Annual report by the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (LAW), 4 February 1999.