



THE ORIGINS OF HAMAS: MILITANT LEGACY OR ISRAELI TOOL?

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Since its creation in 1987, Hamas has been at the forefront of armed resistance in the occupied Palestinian territories. While the movement itself claims an unbroken militancy in Palestine dating back to 1935, others credit post-1967 maneuvers of Israeli Intelligence for its establishment. This article, in assessing these opposing narratives and offering its own interpretation, delves into the historical foundations of Hamas starting with the establishment in 1946 of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (the mother organization) and ending with its emergence as a distinct entity at the outbreak of the first intifada. Particular emphasis is given to the Brotherhood's pre-1987 record of militancy in the Strip, and on the complicated and intertwining relationship between the Brotherhood and Fatah.

HAMAS,¹ FOUNDED IN the Gaza Strip in December 1987, has been the subject of numerous studies, articles, and analyses,² particularly since its victory in the Palestinian legislative elections of January 2006 and its takeover of Gaza in June 2007. Yet despite this, little academic attention has been paid to the historical foundations of the movement, which grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood's Gaza branch established in 1946. Meanwhile, two contradictory interpretations of the movement's origins are in wide circulation.

The first portrays Hamas as heir to a militant lineage, rigorously independent of all Arab regimes, including Egypt, and harking back to 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam,³ a Syrian cleric killed in 1935 while fighting the British in Palestine. This "official history" of the movement, reproduced in the Hamas literature coming out of Gaza,⁴ denies any break in continuity over the last seventy years, as if the Muslim Brotherhood had always been at the vanguard and epicenter of the national struggle. This narrative evidently aims at discrediting other Palestinian factions, chief among them Fatah, identified with the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

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The second interpretation basically depicts Hamas as a “golem,” a creature in Jewish folklore fashioned from mud and made animate who ultimately escapes his master. While the specific analogy was coined by an Israeli advisor to the Israeli occupation authorities in Gaza,⁵ it accurately reflects the widely held belief that Hamas was created by the Israeli security services in Gaza to divide and weaken the Palestinian national movement but ended up, as in the Jewish fable, turning against its creator. This second reading draws especially on the Muslim Brotherhood’s boycott of the anti-Israeli resistance that had been endorsed by all the other factions in the Strip following the June 1967 occupation. For those subscribing to this “counter-history,” there is no authentic nationalism outside of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), founded in 1964 and taken over by Fatah in 1969, with Yasir Arafat at its head.

An in-depth examination of the period from the Muslim Brotherhood’s establishment in Gaza in 1946 to the creation of Hamas in 1987, however, does not give credence to either of these interpretations. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood, far from taking a consistently adversarial position toward the authorities during Egypt’s two-decade-long administration of the Gaza Strip (1948–67), was in fact chosen to head the Gaza municipality in 1952. Moreover, Gaza’s first armed fighters emerged from the Brotherhood’s ranks and played a key role in the eventual founding of Fatah itself. And while the Israeli authorities in 1980 did allow the militant Islamists to attack their Palestinian rivals accused of “communism,” this assault on the Arab Left in Gaza was supported by Fatah as well.

This article aims at clarifying these various points by relying on diverse and mainly Arabic-language sources, both primary and secondary, as well as on interviews conducted in Gaza in November 2010. The fact that during the period examined the Muslim Brotherhood operated openly in the Gaza Strip only briefly—from 1946 to 1948 and from 1952 to 1954—considerably limits the availability of documentation from the movement itself.

IN EGYPT’S SHADOW: THE GAZA BROTHERHOOD AND THE BIRTH OF FATAH

Hassan al-Banna, a schoolteacher in the Egyptian city of Ismailiyya, was only twenty-one years old when he founded the Muslim Brothers (*al-ikhwan al-muslimun*) in March 1928. He had been steeped in religious culture by his father (trained at Al-Azhar) and was also initiated into a Sufi community in the Egyptian Delta. Yet, at odds with the elitist character of the mystical orders, al-Banna’s ambition was to establish an authentically populist movement that combined the moral regeneration of Islam in Egypt with the political restoration of Egyptian rights in the face of the British, who had occupied the country since 1882.

At the heart of the Muslim Brotherhood's doctrine is *jihad*, both in its spiritual sense as "greater jihad" (the struggle against the forces of evil in the believer's soul) and in its militant, even military, sense as "lesser jihad" (the struggle against the enemies of Islam). Within the broader category of lesser jihad, al-Banna insisted that his followers had the duty to undertake "defensive jihad,"⁶ which every Muslim is enjoined to wage until the liberation of his or her land. In line with this doctrine, the Brotherhood organized, parallel to its protests against the British Protectorate in Egypt, increasingly significant campaigns on the Palestine question that set them apart from other political groups and, by virtue of the issue's resonance with the Egyptian people, contributed to expanding its popular base in Egypt.⁷

Meanwhile, in Palestine, jihad was also being invoked at a time when popular opposition to the Mandate government was rising over Britain's "Jewish National Home" policies and sponsorship of mass Jewish immigration. It was in the name of jihad that 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a religious shaykh in Haifa, launched the first guerrilla operation against the British in Palestine in November 1935; his death in battle was one of the triggers of the 1936–39 "Great Arab Revolt" in Palestine. Similarly, the nationalist militia formed in the Jerusalem area at the start of that revolt by 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, nephew of Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem, went by the name of "holy jihad" (*al-jihad al-muqaddas*).

The Palestine rebellion was closely followed in the Arab world, and al-Banna offered to send Egyptian volunteers. But the mufti, the preeminent leader of the revolt, did not take up al-Banna's offer. The inaction imposed by the Palestinian nationalists was accepted by al-Banna, who, unable to insert his volunteers into an existing structure on the ground, was obliged to defer the practice of "defensive jihad" until such time as the Brotherhood could rely on itself. Al-Banna's decision was rejected, however, by a student militant named Ahmad Rifa't, who broke away from the Brotherhood to take up arms in Palestine. He was killed there under obscure circumstances by the Palestinian guerrillas he was trying to help, who likely suspected a British attempt at infiltration.⁸

It was almost a decade before Al-Banna could revisit the idea of armed jihad in Palestine. When World War II ended, the situation in Palestine seemed clearly headed toward open conflict. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had grown to some half million members.⁹ By October 1945, the movement felt strong enough to open a Palestine branch, in Jerusalem, under the leadership of Sa'id Ramadan.

The Spearhead of Jihad

The Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was established on 25 November 1946.¹⁰ The date was chosen to coincide with the start of the year 1366 of the Islamic calendar, but the location was the ultra secular Gaza's Samer Cinema, which had opened in the town center a few

years earlier. In inaugurating the branch, the Brotherhood put forward as leaders two well-respected local sexagenarians. Shaykh Omar Sawan was a retired judge who had had a successful career under the Ottomans (including a posting in Yemen against the wishes of the imam¹¹) and later during the Palestine Mandate. His deputy, Shaykh Abdallah al-Qaychawi, was a preacher at Gaza's Grand Mosque but also an active member of the Gaza chamber of commerce and a sworn enemy of missionary ambitions.¹² But the real leader of the Brotherhood's new Gaza section was its secretary general, Zafer Shawa. He was of a younger generation than Sawan and Qaychawi, with extensive experience in organizing youth in sports clubs and the Islamic Scouts.¹³ All three men belonged to long-established notable families in Gaza.¹⁴

The structure of the Muslim Brothers in Palestine remained closely integrated with the mother organization in Egypt,¹⁵ and the Gaza section was regularly visited by representatives from the Cairo headquarters. As the end of the British Mandate approached, Palestine became Hassan al-Banna's main theater of mobilization. There, he intended not only to play an important role in the anti-Zionist jihad but also to train fighters who, upon their return to Egypt, could take up revolutionary action against the British.

Britain's decision at the end of winter 1947–48 to withdraw its administration from the Gaza district could only play into the hands of a small but active group like the Brotherhood. From 19 to 22 March 1948, al-Banna himself came to Gaza to galvanize his followers and to inaugurate their base of operations in Nusseyrat.¹⁶ During the month of April, Islamist commandos, both Palestinian and Egyptian, harassed Jewish settlements in the area, albeit to little effect.¹⁷ Even before the end of the Mandate, Egyptian officers had been smuggled into Palestine to lead these militants, who attacked (unsuccessfully) the Kfar Darom kibbutz on 10 May 1948.¹⁸

The proclamation of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948, the eve of the expiration of the British Mandate for Palestine, triggered the intervention of the Arab armies, including 10,000 Egyptian soldiers deployed in the Gaza sector. At the same time, Hajj Amin al-Husseini charged Jamal Surani, the son of a former Gaza mayor, with reorganizing the "holy jihad" *al-jihad al-muqaddas* fighters in southern Palestine.¹⁹ While the Muslim Brotherhood fighters were marginalized by these actions, they did manage to contribute to the capture of the Jewish colony Yad Mordechai on 24 May, and even (briefly) captured the position of Asluj from the Israelis on 17 July.²⁰ Their refusal to follow the order of battle and respect truces, however, led to the deterioration of their relations with the Egyptian forces, especially since the Brotherhood in Cairo had

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in the meantime launched a campaign denouncing the “betrayal” of the Arab regimes in the fight against the Zionists.

Indeed, tensions in the Egyptian capital were running so high that on 8 December 1948 Prime Minister Mahmud Noqrashi banned the Muslim Brotherhood altogether and ordered the confiscation of all its possessions. Twenty days later, the movement took its revenge by assassinating Noqrashi. On 12 February 1949, the cycle of violence continued with the murder of Hassan al-Banna himself. From then on, Muslim Brotherhood propaganda has never ceased to portray al-Banna as a martyr who died for his tireless defense of Palestine, and the Brotherhood’s military actions in 1948 as saving Arab honor tarnished by the Arab regimes and their armies.

Brothers and Fedayeen

The Israeli-Egyptian Armistice Agreement, signed in Rhodes under United Nations auspices on 24 February 1949, defined by its line of demarcation the only territory of the former Mandatory Palestine that was neither incorporated into Israel nor annexed to Jordan. Into this territory of some 360 square kilometers, by then named the “Gaza Strip,” were crowded some 200,000 refugees above and beyond its 80,000 original inhabitants. The refugees, who had lost everything during the recent conflict, were settled by the UN in eight theoretically temporary camps. Such was the ratio of refugees to native Gazans that the towns of Jabaliyya (in the north), Deir al-Balah (in the center), and Khan Younis and Rafah (in the south) had fewer residents than the refugee camps bordering them. As for Gaza City, a camp—Beach Camp (Shati in Arabic)—was established on the coastline just north of the town.

The Egyptian administration, headed by a military governor with the rank of general, was in charge of the local civil service inherited from the British Mandate but now staffed with officials displaced from other parts of the country that had fallen to Israel.²¹ Responsibility for the day-to-day management of the Strip, including the public infrastructure, also fell to Egypt, although the UN contributed up to 20 percent of Gaza’s GDP through its various forms of assistance to Palestinian refugees.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza had been banned at the same time as the mother organization in Egypt, in December 1948, but quickly managed to reconstitute itself behind a legal facade. Thus, on 18 May 1949, Zafer Shawa, the former secretary general of the Brotherhood’s Gaza branch, became the head of the “Unification Association” (*jam’iyyat al-tawhid*).²² The organization’s objectives were defined in very general terms—“spreading the faith and consolidating it in Muslim souls,” “general reform,” and “social justice.” Members were also discouraged from engaging in partisan politics.²³ The Association further sponsored social and cultural activities and organized youth camps, where Shawa put his experience with the Islamic Scouts to use and where basic training in

the handling of weapons was given to the most committed members.²⁴ Thanks to the Association, the Brotherhood was able to continue developing its networks, especially in refugee camps, with the result that tens of chapters (*usra*, literally “family”) were created all over the Strip.

Six young militants of the Gaza branch—Fathi Balawi, Salah Khalaf, Khalil al-Wazir, Yussef al-Najjar, Kamal Adwan, and Assad Saftawi—all 1948 refugees,²⁵ stood out for their activism during this period. This “young guard” also included Salim Zaanun, the only one among them to have been born in Gaza. Balawi and Khalaf were students in Cairo, where they became involved in the Palestinian Students Union (PSU) and met Yasir Arafat, the son of a merchant from the Gaza Strip. Before 1948, Arafat had trained with the *Futuwwa*, the Islamic Youth (separate from the Brotherhood). Even though he was not a member of the Brotherhood, Balawi and Khalaf saw him as the ideal “fellow traveler” and campaigned to get him elected head of the PSU in Cairo in September 1952.²⁶ The three Palestinians, imbued with the same nationalist passion, were eager to move beyond student organizing in order to take action. The nearby Gaza Strip, to which they all had ties, was the obvious place.

In July 1952, the Egyptian monarchy was overthrown by the Free Officers revolution. The Muslim Brothers wholeheartedly supported the republican junta, although they preferred General Mohammed Neguib to Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Brotherhood was rewarded in Gaza for its support of the revolution, with Shaykh Omar Sawan being named by the Egyptian governor to head the municipality. The Brotherhood also organized the transport by Egyptian train of humanitarian aid to Gaza, which was then distributed by its militants in the Strip.²⁷

In exchange for all these facilities, however, the Muslim Brothers had to promise to end the cross-border infiltration into Israel being carried out by their members inside the Gaza security forces. This decision was opposed by the most determined of the young militants, who formed two dissident groups led respectively by Khalil al-Wazir, who took the nom de guerre Abu Jihad, and Salah Khalaf, code named Abu Iyad.²⁸ Saftawi and Zaanun were members of Khalaf’s group, while Wazir’s group included Adwan, who was unfailingly loyal to him.²⁹

The Muslim Brotherhood’s delicate balancing act between the Free Officers and the younger activists allowed it to consolidate its position in Gaza, to the point that it became the largest political formation there, with a thousand members by 1954.³⁰ But an assassination attempt against Nasser in October of that year, followed by Neguib’s ouster from power, led to a harsh crackdown against the movement. In Gaza, Shaykh Sawan lost the mayoralty as arbitrarily as he had gained it, and the Islamist militants soon were in open opposition to the regime, no longer hesitating to collaborate with local communists against the “dictator Nasser.”³¹ An Israeli raid led by Ariel Sharon into the heart of Gaza on 28 February 1955 (causing forty-six deaths, including eight Israeli soldiers) lit the fuse.

Balawi and Najjar were at the head of mass demonstrations—referred to at the time as an *intifada*—of Palestinians enraged by Egypt's failure to confront Israel and demanding to be armed. Both men were imprisoned in Egypt for over two years, along with dozens of other militants, both Islamist and communist.

Following another Israeli raid on 22 August 1955, Nasser decided to retaliate by sending waves of Palestinian commandos, or *fedayeen*,³² organized by Colonel Mustafa Hafez, chief of Egyptian security in Gaza, to infiltrate Israel. A number of these fedayeen were Islamist militants, some released from prison expressly for this purpose, who were recruited on condition that they break their affiliation with the Brotherhood to carry out these missions.³³

The fedayeen campaigns of August 1955 and April 1956 provoked harsh Israeli reprisals, and Colonel Hafez was assassinated on 11 July 1956 via a booby-trapped parcel. But the most important result of the fedayeen campaigns was to convince the Israeli high command that occupying Gaza and humiliating Nasser were indispensable for securing Israel's southern border. Such was the objective of Operation Kadash, adopted in the greatest secrecy on 8 October 1956³⁴ and incorporated into the agreements reached at Sèvres on 24 October with France and the United Kingdom in preparation for their tripartite invasion of Egypt.³⁵ In keeping with these plans, Israel launched an attack on Egypt on 29 October, phase I of the Suez war, seizing the Gaza Strip on 2 November 1956.

With the occupation of Gaza, most of the Palestinian fedayeen withdrew to Egypt, sometimes by sea, as was the case for Kamal Adwan, who then proceeded to Cairo where he was able to find Abu Jihad.³⁶ The Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, meanwhile, joined the civil resistance organized during this four-month-long first Israeli occupation of the Strip. The restoration of the Egyptian administration in March 1957, however, did not translate into a return to the status quo ante, as Egyptian security was now determined to prevent further infiltration into Israel. The hard core of the most politicized fedayeen, prohibited from returning to Gaza, dispersed to the Gulf to await better days. From Kuwait, Abu Jihad issued an appeal to his former Brotherhood comrades, calling on them to give priority to the armed struggle to liberate Palestine.³⁷

Abu Jihad's appeal had no echo in Gaza, where the Brotherhood's legal front, the Unification Association, was banned in 1958. Thereafter, the local movement was preoccupied above all with preserving its networks and kept a low profile, even sidelining Balawi when he was released from Egyptian prison. Abu Iyad, however, managed to continue his teaching duties while running a small underground group for two years, before being deported to Kuwait, where he joined his comrades Arafat and Abu Jihad.

It was there that the three founded the "Movement for Palestinian Liberation," known as Fatah, in October 1959.³⁸ Adwan and Najjar also

took part in this clandestine initiative, soon to be joined by Balawi and Zaanun—an indication of just how dominant the former Gaza Islamists were in Fatah's founding circle. Only Saftawi stayed behind in Gaza, first as a teacher and then as a headmaster in refugee camp schools. He nonetheless remained in contact with the movement through Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), another Fatah founder, who made regular visits to the Strip heading missions on behalf of Qatar's Ministry of Education.³⁹

The Muslim Brotherhood's Gaza section, primarily focused on the movement's survival as an organization, had distanced itself from the nationalist agitation that took off after Israel's 1956–57 occupation of the Strip. Shaykh Sawan died in 1958 and Qayshawi in 1962, while Zafer Shawa was kept under tight surveillance and often harassed by Egyptian security. The Muslim Brothers therefore remained passive when the PLO was created, at Egypt's initiative, in 1964, and began recruiting in the Gaza Strip, bringing in thousands of members. The Islamists meanwhile sharpened their vision of Nasser as a "tyrant," even a new "Pharaoh."

It was in this context that Ahmad Yasin, a pious schoolteacher in Gaza City's Shati refugee camp, was attracting a growing following through his preaching. Yasin, who was born in 1936 in Jura, a village destroyed in 1948 near the present-day Ashqelon, joined the Muslim Brotherhood early on and rigorously adhered to the Brotherhood's moralizing line that prioritized spiritual revival over active militancy. Confined to a wheelchair from early youth as a result of a serious accident, he delivered weekly sermons at Shati mosque in a thin voice. Although he had not formally studied religion (he had a teaching certificate, with training in Arabic and English, from Ayn Shams University in Cairo), his growing circle of followers called him "Shaykh."

In August 1965, Nasser accused the Muslim Brothers of trying to reconstitute their organization, and a new campaign of arrests was launched against them. In Cairo, Sayyid Qutb, the Brotherhood's ideologue and theorist, was arrested and hanged the next year. In Gaza, Hani Bseisso, head of the local Brotherhood's underground branch, was arrested and expelled to the Gulf. Yasin was imprisoned, but since he was not active politically he was released relatively quickly.⁴⁰ At barely thirty years old, he thus came to fill the void created by the elimination of the rest of the Brotherhood's leadership in Gaza.

Egypt's two-decade administration of the Gaza Strip (May 1948–June 1967, with the four-month interruption of Israeli occupation of 1956–57) ended in a radical transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood's local branch. The Brotherhood had been at the forefront of armed jihad in 1948, but its decision to suspend military action in the mid-1950s alienated the younger activists, leading them to break away to pursue the military struggle on their own. Severe repression as of the late 1950s decimated its ranks, and the death or disappearance from the scene of the shaykhs and notables who founded the Brotherhood's Gaza section

left Ahmad Yasin, by default, in charge of what remained of the network, convincing him of the wisdom of his strictly legalistic approach. Meanwhile, the former dissidents of the Brotherhood's Gaza section, now the leaders of the Fatah movement they had founded from their exile in the Gulf, were also under heavy fire by the Nasser regime for their armed provocations (from Syria and elsewhere), which Cairo condemned for playing into Israel's hands.

On the eve of the 1967 war, Palestinian nationalism in the Gaza Strip was thus dominated by forces allied with Egypt. On the one hand were the followers of George Habash's Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), which in Gaza benefited from the support of Egypt's intelligence services; on the other, the Gaza-based "brigade" of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA),⁴¹ officially the PLO's "armed force" but actually Palestinian auxiliary units built into the Egyptian army and under Egyptian command. The Palestinian militants who had emerged from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood were by then few and far between, either because they had opted for Shaykh Yasin's low-profile approach or because they had rallied to the rare Fatah cells already existing in the Strip at the time. As for Fatah itself, within the core group of the movement's leadership, Yasir Arafat and Abu Iyad had chosen to focus their energies on the West Bank and Jordan, with only Abu Jihad still hoping eventually to regain a foothold in the Strip.

THE BROTHERHOOD UNDER OCCUPATION AND THE GROWTH OF FATAH

Israel's air offensive against Egypt on 5 June 1967 was immediately followed by an armored ground assault on the Gaza Strip, where, after heavy fighting in Rafah and Khan Younis, the Egyptian governor surrendered on the morning of 7 June. Having learned from their previous experience of Israeli occupation with the Suez war, the nationalist networks remained in place, and the PLA fighters still on the ground, having lost their auxiliary function in the Egyptian rout, acquired in the process real operational independence. The Strip's various political parties secretly agreed to form the broadest possible alliance to face the occupier. Communists, Ba'thists, Arab nationalists, and union activists rallied around prominent figures known for their patriotism, especially Haydar Abdel Shafi, one of the founders of the PLO, and Munir Rayess, the mayor of Gaza who had been deposed by the Israelis in 1957.⁴²

It seemed obvious to all the parties involved that the Muslim Brotherhood would join this anti-Israel alliance and take part in the resistance, at least in some form, for example the civil variety as in 1956-57. Yasin's categorical refusal, delivered to the emissary of the alliance dispatched to meet him, therefore came as a shock.⁴³ Yet Yasin's was a "conscious decision"⁴⁴ and was endorsed by the Brotherhood's local leadership, unwilling to jeopardize what it had managed to preserve from

Nasserist repression for the sake of what it saw as a confrontation lost in advance. Islamist literature at the time was exceptionally vitriolic with regard to the Egyptian regime, seeing in its humiliation the punishment inflicted on

false prophets of liberation and revolution, deceitful heroes who have misled their people, who have exiled the preachers of Islam, thrown into prison the purest Muslim youth, combatted any sincere Islamic sermon, all the while encouraging moral corruption, intellectual deviance, and imported lifestyles.⁴⁵

The Establishment of the Mujamma

It took the Israeli army four long years to completely pacify Gaza. The Israelis scored some initial successes in dismantling the secret cells established in the war's aftermath, but by 1969–70 the occupation forces were being seriously harassed by reconstituted fedayeen networks. Spearheading the resistance were three main groups: the Popular Liberation Forces (PLF), basically remnants of the PLA who had eluded capture and deportation by the Israelis or who subsequently managed to sneak back into the territory;⁴⁶ Fatah; and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which had emerged from the ANM's Palestine branch.

The task of crushing the developing resistance fell to General Sharon, commander of the southern region, who did so with great brutality, culminating in the summer of 1971 in the forced relocation of some 38,000 Palestinian refugees from the most densely populated camps to elsewhere in the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, and the West Bank.⁴⁷ Israeli bulldozers virtually reconfigured the refugee camps by clearing great swaths of habitation, creating spaces of control and patrols. Arms caches were destroyed and guerrilla hideouts obliterated, dealing a decisive blow to the fedayeen forces. The deaths of two iconic leaders of the resistance, the PLF's Ziad al-Husseini on 21 November 1971 and the PFLP's Muhammad al-Aswad, known as "Gaza's Guevara," on 9 March 1973, marked the end of the Gaza's military struggle.

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Throughout this entire period, the Muslim Brotherhood was spared the extreme repression visited upon the resistance, which included the deportation of 380 Palestinians from Gaza to Jordan from 1968 to 1972,⁴⁸ the detention of at least 3,700 Gazans at the height of the arrest waves in summer 1971,⁴⁹ and the killing of 71 fedayeen in 1970 and 104 in 1971.⁵⁰ As the nationalist forces were being bled dry, Shaykh Yasin was patiently constructing, piece by piece, a whole network of interlocking activities subsumed under the name *Al-Mujamma' al-Islami*, which can be

translated as either “Islamic Center” or “Islamic Union.”⁵¹ Locally known simply as the Mujamma, it carried out charitable and social activities (e.g., tutoring, sports, even the organization of collective weddings to reduce the cost of the ceremony) in the entire Gaza Strip. Significantly, the Israeli governor attended the inauguration of what became the Mujamma’s showcase, the Jawrat al-Shams mosque, on 7 September 1973.⁵²

Yasin never deviated from his legalistic approach to interactions with whichever authorities were in charge, giving no greater recognition to the representatives of the Hebrew state than he had before 1967 to those of the “Pharaoh” Nasser, perceived as an enemy of Islam. For the Israeli governor, who had inherited from his Egyptian predecessor the administration of religious affairs,⁵³ the aim, predictably, was to weaken the nationalist camp still further by encouraging the Islamist alternative. The occupying power did not go so far as to give official sanction to the Mujamma, but instead opted for a benevolent—but by definition reversible—tolerance. At the time this position suited the Mujamma’s leadership, which included Abdelaziz Rantissi, Mahmoud Zahar, Abdelfattah Dukhan, and Ibrahim Yazuri. These same men, all devotees of Shaykh Yasin, were still at the helm of Hamas’s leadership some fifteen years later.

The Muslim Brothers in the Gaza Strip, whose membership in 1969 had reached a low of 50,⁵⁴ took advantage of the Mujamma’s development to intensify recruitment and rebuild their strength. The organization was headed by an “executive committee” or “bureau” of seven members drawn from a “consultative council” (*majlis al-shura*) representing the five districts of the Strip: Gaza, Khan Younis, Rafah, the North (Beit Hanun, Jabaliyya, and Beit Lahiya), and the Centre (Deir al-Balah, Nusseyrat, and Maghazi).⁵⁵ Cut off since 1967 from its Egyptian parent, the Brotherhood’s Gaza branch increasingly tightened its links with its Jordanian counterpart, of which the West Bank section was dependent.⁵⁶ In 1976, the Brotherhood further expanded its reach in Gaza by creating a charitable organization, the Islamic Association (*al-Jam’iyya al-islamiyya*), which administered a public dispensary in Shati camp under the authority of Khalil al-Qawqa, the imam of the camp’s mosque.⁵⁷

An Anti-Communist Struggle before Being Anti-Israeli

Israel’s decision to grant official recognition to the Mujamma in September 1979 should be understood in the context of the confrontation between the occupation authorities on the one hand and the Palestinian national movement, then bent on rejecting the Palestinian “autonomy” envisaged by the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty signed in March,⁵⁸ on the other. Israel’s recognition increased the Mujamma’s room for maneuver, in terms of both administrative organization and financial mobilization. Emboldened by this development, Shaykh Yasin believed himself sufficiently strong to take on the Mujamma’s only real competitor in the social field, Gaza’s Red Crescent organization, which Haydar Abdel Shafi, who

was close to the communists, had founded in 1972 and subsequently transformed into a bastion of Palestinian nationalism.

The Brotherhood was encouraged in this maneuver by Fatah, especially because Abu Jihad, in exile in Beirut along with the rest of the PLO leadership, wanted to bring the communists and the PFLP in Gaza to heel. The architect of this anti-Marxist rapprochement was Assad Saftawi, alone among the group of former Islamist fedayeen of Gaza not to have left for the Gulf when Fatah was founded two decades earlier. Saftawi, backed by Yazuri from the Mujamma's leadership, ran for president of the Red Crescent in December 1979 against Abdel Shafi, who was reelected overwhelmingly by the organization's approximately 4,000 members. Several hundred Islamist demonstrators expressed their anger on 7 January 1980 by ransacking the Red Crescent offices before moving on to cafés, cinemas, and drinking establishments in the town center. The nationalists denounced the Israeli army's clearly deliberate failure to intervene during these disturbances.⁵⁹

The following years were replete with similar incidents involving Shaykh Yasin's supporters assaulting Palestinian adversaries labeled as communists. But the Mujamma's attacks, which initially focused on the Marxist-leaning PFLP and its allies, soon turned against Fatah itself. This was particularly the case during the all-out struggle between the two movements for control of Gaza's Islamic University, established in 1978 and the only institution of higher learning in the Strip at the time. In January 1983, the "Islamic Bloc," a Mujamma offshoot, won 51 percent of the vote in student elections, allowing it to impose its law on campus.⁶⁰ The Gazan Muslim Brothers also took part in Islamist shows of strength in the West Bank, where the polarization of the Palestinian political scene favored their development. The tensions were exacerbated by the grave crisis facing the PLO since Israel's invasion of Lebanon in summer 1982, which culminated in the fedayeen's expulsion from Beirut by the Israeli army in September, and by the Syrian-manipulated "dissidence" within Fatah as of spring 1983.

The Israeli army's discovery in June 1984 of some sixty pistols and submachine guns hidden in Shaykh Yasin's mosque led to his arrest and sentencing to thirteen years in prison. Even if the arms were primarily intended to intimidate other Palestinian factions,⁶¹ Yasin's incarceration allowed his supporters to wash him of all suspicions of collaboration with Israel. The Islamist leader was freed in May 1985 within the framework of a prisoner exchange between Israel and the PFLP-General Command, a breakaway anti-PLO faction based in Damascus. Henceforth, Rantissi and Yazuri ran the Mujamma in the name of Shaykh Yasin, whose reputation, magnified by his imprisonment (which in fact lasted only a year), was expanding well beyond the Islamist sphere.

Despite these developments, the Muslim Brotherhood remained firm in its policy of refusing confrontation with Israel. Indeed, this position

had served it well, with the number of mosques in the Strip having nearly doubled under Israeli occupation, from seventy-seven in 1967 to 150 in 1986.⁶² But the Brotherhood's quietist stance was increasingly challenged by a new group, Islamic Jihad, founded and led by Fathi Shikaki, a former member of the Brotherhood who had long served as liaison between the movement's West Bank and the Gaza branches.⁶³ Pushed by Islamic Jihad's multiplying attacks against Israel starting in 1986, Yasin decided to endow his organization with its own security apparatus, the *Majd*,⁶⁴ which performed the dual function of protecting Islamist networks (against Israel and other factions) and suppressing social deviance (drugs, prostitution, etc.).⁶⁵ Thus, even within the Brotherhood's first armed branch in Gaza, the priority remained the enemy within, not the Israeli occupier.

The outbreak of riots in the Gaza Strip on 9 December 1987, which quickly spread to the West Bank and came to be known as the first intifada, was as much a surprise to the Muslim Brotherhood as to the PLO. The Islamist leadership was tempted to keep a low profile, and it was ultimately Shaykh Yasin who imposed on his divided followers his decision to participate in the uprising against Israel.⁶⁶ This break with the past became concrete with the formal creation, on 14 December, of Hamas, dedicated to "Islamic resistance." Still, two more months would pass before this acronym was officially recognized, and eight months before a Hamas charter was adopted.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza had strategically opted for the nationalist course of action, thereby consolidating its independence vis-à-vis the movement's Jordanian branch. Hamas's establishment, forty-one years after that of the local section of the Muslim Brotherhood, marked the beginning of a new era in Gaza's history.

After reviewing, however briefly, the Muslim Brotherhood's four decades of history in the Gaza Strip, it is difficult to support either Hamas's "official history" or the "golem" counter-narrative. True, the Muslim Brothers represented the bulk of the fedayeen fighting in and around Gaza in the battles of 1948, but their military contribution to the anti-Zionist struggle was at best debatable; the credit for saving what would become the "Gaza Strip" from collective disaster unquestionably goes to the Egyptian army. It is also true that Brotherhood activists pushed for armed infiltrations from the Gaza Strip into Israel up until 1952, but the movement thereafter bowed to the Free Officers' ban on commando operations. The younger Brotherhood activists, who had been incensed by the leadership's passivity, eventually broke away from the movement when they had the chance to enlist in the fedayeen campaigns of 1955–56 run by Egyptian security. One can conclude, then, that the Muslim Brothers in Gaza cannot rightfully claim a leadership role in the development of the national liberation struggle.

But neither can their caricature as tools of Israel after 1967 be justified. True, they broke away from the nationalist consensus and remained

conspicuously neutral during the four bitter years of armed resistance against the Israel Defense Forces in the Strip in the wake of the 1967 war. But this was a long-term strategy whose aim was to establish, through fierce competition first with the leftist factions and then with Fatah, a solid power base among the local population, and it was the people's uprising in 1987 that led to the Mujamma's transformation into Hamas.

Beyond the self-serving and contradictory versions circulated by Fatah and Hamas to buttress their own credentials, the paths of the two movements in Gaza have repeatedly crossed and intertwined. The former emerged from a dissidence within the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas the latter grew out of the Brotherhood's social networks before belatedly embracing resistance (and adopting its current name). In certain ways, Shaykh Yasin's 1987 decision to join the all-out uprising against Israel brings his movement full circle by reversing—thirty years later—the Brotherhood's rejection of Abu Jihad's call for them to join the armed struggle.

There are other ironies in Hamas's "prehistory." Nasser's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood at home after 1954 pushed thousands of Egyptian Brothers into exile, but in Gaza it was the dissident members—the future founders of Fatah—who were forced to leave the Strip under Egyptian pressure while their former Brotherhood comrades managed, despite constant harassment, to stay put.

Thus has the relationship within the PLO between the leadership—exiled first in Jordan, then in Lebanon, and finally in Tunis—and the nationalists in the Gaza Strip (and to a lesser extent the West Bank) been a complicated one. By contrast, because the Muslim Brotherhood of Gaza had hunkered down and consolidated its entrenchment in the Strip during the first two decades of the Israeli occupation, this tension between the "outside" and the "inside" has not been an issue for them. The paradox is that even though this territorialization of Palestinian Islamism gave birth to Hamas and became its principal asset, it was the PLO from the "outside," and therefore the Palestinian diaspora, that would finally bring forth the project of an independent state living side by side with Israel.

ENDNOTES

1. Hamas is an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement (*barakat al-muqawama al-islamiyya*). The word Hamas also means zeal, enthusiasm, fervor, or even exaltation.

2. The forerunner among these is Jean-François Légrain's *Les Voix du soulèvement palestinien* [The voices of the Palestinian uprising] (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1991).

3. The armed branch of Hamas, referred to as brigades (*kata'ib*, which

can also be translated as battalions), took Izz al-Din al-Qassam's name; in the same spirit, Hamas's home-made rockets launched against Israel are called "Qassams."

4. A good illustration of this narrative can be found in the foreword to a Hamas-published booklet, *Ayâm al-Ghadab* [Days of wrath] (Gaza: Dar al-Manara, 2005), pp. 8–15. See also Falah Salama Sudfi and A'tadal Saadallah Qanayta, *Assad*

al-muqâwama, al-shabîd duktûr 'Abd al-'Azîz al-Rantissî [Lion of resistance, the martyr doctor Abdelaziz Rantissî] (Gaza: Maktab al-Jil, 2010), or Yahya Sinwar, *Al-Majd* [The glory] (Gaza: Waed, 2009).

5. Avner Cohen, a religious advisor to the Israeli commander of the Gaza Strip, used the term "golem" to describe Muslim Brotherhood networks in Gaza in an internal memorandum dated March 1984. Cited in Charles Enderlin, *Le Grand aveuglement* [The Great Blindness] (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009), p. 117.

6. For a brief overview of the various doctrines of jihad, see Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Les Frontières du Jihad* [The boundaries of jihad] (Paris: Fayard, 2006), pp. 25–26 and 36–38.

7. Awatif Abderrahmane, *Masr wa Filistin* [Egypt and Palestine] (Cairo: Aam al-Maarifa, no. 26, February 1990), p. 115.

8. Abd al-Fattah Al-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question 1928–1947* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 95–96.

9. Al-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers*, p. 135.

10. Invitation reproduced in Ahmed Mohammed al-Sa'ati, *Al-tattawur al-thaqafi fi Ghazza* [The cultural evolution in Gaza] (Gaza: Islamic University, 2005), vol. 2, p. 110.

11. Noman Abdelhadi Faysal, *A'lam min jil al-ruwad min Ghazzatu Hashem* [Figures of the generation of pioneers in Hachem's Gaza] (Gaza: Dar al-Duktur, 2010), p. 446.

12. Faysal, *A'lam min jil al-ruwad min Ghazzatu Hashem*, pp. 610–12.

13. Faysal, *A'lam min jil al-ruwad min Ghazzatu Hashem*, p. 417.

14. For the genealogy of the Shawa, Sawan, and Qaychawi families, see Uthman Mustapha Tabaa, *Ithaf al-'izza fi tarikh Ghazza* [Contributions to the glory of Gaza's history] (Gaza: Al-Yazji, 1999, original 1950 ed.), vol. 3, pp. 255–56, 281, and 393, respectively.

15. Al-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers*, p. 161.

16. Al-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers*, p. 208.

17. Haïm Levenberg, *The Military Preparation of the Arab Community in Palestine* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), p. 177.

18. Awda Mohammed Ben Ayyash, *Rafah, madîna 'ala al-budûd* [Rafah, a city at the borders] (Gaza: Rashad Shawa Cultural Center, 2002), p. 93.

19. Faysal, *A'lam min jil al-ruwad min Ghazzatu Hashem*, pp. 455–56.

20. Al-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers*, p. 209.

21. Ilana Feldman, *Governing Gaza 1917–58* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 102–103.

22. The concept of unification (*taubid*) refers to the Islamic profession of faith in the oneness of God. This concept takes on a more militant dimension with the preachings of Abd al-Wahhab (1703–87) in central Arabia: his "Wahhabi" disciples call themselves *muwabbidun*, followers of *taubid*. Supporters of various fundamentalist movements use *taubid* to justify their exclusion, or even repression, of other strands of Islam.

23. Charter of the Association, reproduced in Sa'ati, *Al-tattawur al-thaqafi fi Ghazza*, vol. 2, p. 109.

24. Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 43–44.

25. Fathi Balawi was born in 1929 near Tulkarm; Salah Khalaf was born in 1933 in Jaffa; Yussef al-Najjar was born in 1930 in Yibna; Khalil al-Wazir, Kamal Adwan, and Assad Saftawi were all born in 1935, in Ramla, Barbara, and Majdal (current-day Ashqelon), respectively.

26. Abou Iyad (Salah Khalaf), *Palestinien sans patrie* [Palestinian without a homeland] (Paris: Fayolle, 1978), p. 45, and Hassan Balawi, *Dans les coulisses du mouvement national palestinien* [Behind the scenes of the Palestinian national movement] (Paris: Denoël, 2008), p. 55.

27. Hussein Abu Naml, *Qita' Ghazza 1948–1967* [The Gaza Strip 1948–1967] (Beirut: Palestinian Research Center, 1979), p. 67.

28. Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 81–82, and Saqr Abou Fakhr, "Genèse des organisations de la résistance palestinienne" [Genesis of Palestine resistance organizations], in *Revue d'études palestiniennes* 81 (Fall 2001), p. 50.

29. Faysal, *A'lam min jil al-ruwad min Ghazzatu Hashem*, p. 433.

30. Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, p. 44.

31. Interview with Eyad al-Sarraj, Gaza, 6 November 2010.

32. The term fedayeen comes from the Arabic *fida'i* (plural *fida'iyyun*, *fida'iyyin*), literally "the one who sacrifices (his life)." The term was already used interchangeably with "mujahideen" (*mujabid*, plural *mujabidun*, *mujabidin*, jihad fighter) to designate Palestinian guerrilla fighters in 1936–39 and in 1947–48.

33. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, p. 63.

34. Moshe Dayan, *Diary of the Sinai Campaign* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 39.

35. Henry Laurens, *La question de Palestine* [The Palestine question], vol. III (1947–67) (Paris: Fayard, 2007), pp. 486–87.

36. Interview with Intissar al-Wazir (Umm Jihad), Gaza, 4 November 2010.

37. Interview with Hassan Balawi, Paris, 22 November 2010.

38. Fatah is the inverted Arabic acronym for Palestine Liberation Movement (*barakat al-tahrir al-filistiniyya*) and in Arab historiography designates both the capture of Mecca by the Prophet Muhammad and the conquests (*fath*, plural *futubat*) carried out in the name of Islam.

39. Balawi, *Dans les coulisses du mouvement national palestinien*, p. 67.

40. Faysal, *A'lam min jil al-ruwad min Ghazzatu Hashem*, p. 684.

41. Other PLA brigades were based in Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, where they also operated as auxiliaries to the local armies.

42. Abdelkader Yasine, *Umr fi al-manfa* [A life in exile] (Damascus: Dar al-Wataniyya al-Jadida, 2009), pp. 61–62.

43. Interview with Ghazi Sourani, Gaza, 9 November 2010.

44. In the words of a leader of the Gaza Muslim Brotherhood cited in Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, p. 92.

45. Cited in Adnan Abu Amir, *Al-baraka al-islamiyya fi qita' Ghazza* [The Islamic movement in the Gaza Strip] (Cairo: Markaz al-A'lam al-arabi, 2006), p. 17.

46. The PLF came about as a result of the PLO's decision to adapt the PLA

to guerrilla warfare through transformation into commando units. The PLF was more active, by far, in Gaza than anywhere else.

47. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, p. 287.

48. Ann Mosely Lesch, "Deportation of Palestinians from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1979), p. 104.

49. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, p. 287.

50. These numbers are taken from Israeli sources: for 1970, *Jerusalem Post*, 1 January 1971; for 1971, Ariel Sharon himself in *Ha'aretz*, 7 January 1972.

51. Because *mujamma* in Arabic applies to the idea of network equally well to that of centralization, it has been decided here to retain the Arabic term; the same decision was made, for example, in Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

52. Enderlin, *Le Grand aveuglement*, p. 53.

53. Michael Dumper, *Islam and Israel* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1994), p. 97.

54. Abu Amir, *Al-baraka al-islamiyya fi qita' Ghazza*, p. 36.

55. Abu Amir, *Al-baraka al-islamiyya fi qita' Ghazza*, p. 35.

56. The Muslim Brotherhood enjoys legal status in Jordan, from which it inherited its annexationist views toward the West Bank. This is why the Islamist organization is led from Amman but is active on both sides of the River Jordan.

57. Abu Amir, *Al-baraka al-islamiyya fi qita' Ghazza*, p. 48.

58. The treaty, signed by Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat on 26 March 1979, comprises two sections, one focusing on Israeli-Egyptian peace and the other on the Palestine question. The latter envisages the "autonomy" of the West Bank and Gaza populations, whose territory remained under Israeli occupation.

59. Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, pp. 106–107.

60. Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 24.

61. Enderlin, *Le Grand aveuglement*, pp. 117–18.

62. Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 21.

63. Fathi Shikaki (1951–95), born in Gaza in a family of refugees from Jaffa, was radicalized by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, causing him to break away from Shaykh Yasin and establish Islamic Jihad in 1981.

64. Majd, which means glory, is the acronym for *munazzamat al-jihad wa al-da'awa*, the “Jihad and Preaching Organization.”

65. Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 34.

66. Interview with Rabah Mohanna, Gaza, 5 November 2010.

67. Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, p. 35.