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Ḥamās

[This entry contains two subentries:

OVERVIEW

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM]

Overview

The organization Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmīyah (Movement of Islamic Resistance), the most important Palestinian Islamist organization in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is known by its acronym "Ḥamās." A non-*Qur'ān* word, *ḥamās* means "zeal." The organization was established in December 1987, at the very beginning of the first Palestinian uprising (*intifāḍah*), as an expression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine. Therefore, participation in the anti-Israeli resistance after two decades of Islamic political quietism, stood at the heart of the Ḥamās credo. Since 2006, Ḥamās has formed the majority party of the Legislative Council of the Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority. Its armed wing is known as the *'Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām Brigades*, a reference to the *shaykh* killed by the British at the beginning of the great Palestinian revolt in 1936.

Emergence of Ḥamās.

Before the emergence of Ḥamās, Islam had rarely constituted the primary justification for the contemporary liberation struggle of the Palestinians; rather, Arab or Palestinian nationalisms were the ideological pillars used by various leaders. At the end of the 1970s, however, new types of Islamic activism appeared. Present in Jerusalem as a benevolent organization since the 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood articulated, as its primary goal, the reinvigoration of an Islamic identity. As political Islam and Islamism expanded in the region in the 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood became more active but confined its political measures to the struggle against the Palestinian Communist Party. The group's failure to

confront Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories (i.e., the West Bank and Gaza), ongoing since 1967 in violation of U.N. security regulations, cost the group political legitimacy in the view of many Palestinians. But its large social welfare network (consisting of schools, orphanages, healthcare clinics, and the like) in the Gaza Strip, established under the charismatic leadership of the handicapped schoolmaster Shaykh Aḥmad Yāsīn (killed by the Israeli army in 2004), endeared the group to others. Noticeably, the Brotherhood earned popular support in a majority of Gaza mosques, and came to control Gaza's Islamic University. In the West Bank, however, the group failed to establish a strong network or find a charismatic leader; its only strongholds were in the universities. At this time, Fatah, the dominant wing of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and Jordan, still linked to the West Bank, encouraged Islamist attacks on leftist elements, and Israel encouraged the religious group to counter the militant nationalist leaders.

When some new Islamist groups adopted a strongly anti-Israeli discourse, arguing that Israel constituted the spearhead of Western aggression against Islam, the liberation of Palestine was transformed into a fundamentally religious question. Under the leadership of the physician Dr. Faṭḥī Shiqāqī (1951–1995), various factions engaged in *jihād* against Israel, including initiating armed struggle, a central religious duty. In doing so, activists claimed to be acting on the authority of Sayyid Quṭb, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader executed in 1966 and the inspiration of the Egyptian Islamic Jihād as well as the Islamic revolution in Iran. In 1986 and 1987, Jihād cells embarked on a series of anti-Israeli guerrilla operations, some of which were bloody affairs.

By 1987, and in the wake of military operations, the whole Palestinian population mobilized against the Israeli occupation through the *intifāḍah*. Muslim Brotherhood leaders then concluded that their survival as an associative movement dedicated to preaching largely depended on permanent political mobilization. As the “strong arm” of the Brotherhood in the Palestinian Uprising, Ḥamās was created in Gaza by the physician Dr. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Rantīsī (killed by the Israeli army in 2004); Salah Shihādah (killed by the Israeli army in 2002), chief of the security apparatus of the Brotherhood; and other young Brotherhood members with Shaykh Yāsīn's approval.

With the political, military, and social commitment of the Brotherhood, Ḥamās integrated religion and patriotism, monopolized until then by nationalist forces, and secured a growing popular support. Shortly after its foundation, Ḥamās opened representative bureaus outside Palestine, and entered (and won) student and professional elections.

Political Activities.

Ḥamās's aims and strategies, similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, were first summarized in a covenant (*mīthāq*) published in August 1988. In it, Palestine was declared an eternal religious trust, no part of which may be given up. Therefore, recognizing the legitimacy of the Israeli state—as the PLO did in 1988—was deemed unacceptable. Ḥamās leaders have nevertheless declared, in the mid-1990s, that they will accept a long-term truce in return for a complete withdrawal by Israel from the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip, as well as the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Beyond the covenant, Ḥamās boycotted Palestine's 1996 presidential and legislative elections, along with the 2005 presidential election, ostensibly because it could not condone the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreements. However, in 2005, Ḥamās participated in Palestine's municipal elections—with the justification that its participation was in the social interest of the Palestinian people—and took control of many municipalities. In 2006 it gained the majority of seats in the Palestinian legislature, and Ismā‘īl Haniyyah (1962–), one of Ḥamās's leaders in Gaza, became prime minister of the Palestinian Authority.

To end Ḥamās rocket attacks on Israeli border towns, Egypt obtained a ceasefire in June 2008, which

secured a pledge to prevent fresh assaults. The agreement was breached four months later when Israel carried out a military action ostensibly targeted to avert an abduction. After Israel discovered tunnels dug under the border security fence, it organized the assassination of seven Ḥamās operatives that led to retaliations. A barrage of rockets led to the December 2008 Israeli raids. Starting on December 27, 2008, Israel bombarded Gaza in what it termed "Operation Cast Lead," which resulted in hundreds of casualties. A unilateral ceasefire was declared on January 17, 2009, although none of the underlying causes that led to the confrontations were solved.

In July 2009, Khālīd Mish'al, the Ḥamās political bureau chief headquartered in Damascus, Syria, stated his willingness to cooperate with a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that included a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders. His conditions that an undetermined number of Palestinian refugees should be given the right to return to Israel, and that East Jerusalem be recognized as the new state's capital, were rejected. In May 2011, Mish'al decided to move to Doha, Qatar, in the aftermath of the uprisings that shook the Syrian capital. Once again, Ḥamās was in search of a home, even if this latest relocation enlarged the distance from Palestine.

The Ḥamās movement is banned by Israel and is listed as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union. After the 2004 killings of the Ḥamās founder Shaykh Yāsīn and his successor al-Rantīsī, the identity of Ḥamās's leader is not officially known. Many believe that Mahmud al-Zahhār, a Gaza physician who was Palestine's minister of foreign affairs in 2006, leads the group.

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Parliamentary Reform

Ḥamās won the Palestinian legislative elections of January 25, 2006. In doing so, it became one of the first Islamic movements in the Arab world to assume majority control of a government following a series of internationally verified elections. Running under the parliamentary bloc name “Change and Reform,” Ḥamās won seventy-four out of the 132 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) seats, gaining a 56 percent majority position with over 42 percent of the popular vote. Ḥamās's unexpected and unprecedented victory—called by some an “electoral tsunami”—ended more than four decades of political domination by Fatah, Ḥamās's most formidable electoral opponent and a secular-nationalist rival. Fatah's widespread reputation for incompetence, cronyism, and corruption was widely perceived as contributing to Ḥamās's sweeping electoral victory.

The decision to participate in the 2006 PLC elections marked a transformational moment for Ḥamās, a twenty-year-old Palestinian Islamic nationalist movement established in the early months of the first Palestinian *intifāḍah* (uprising). In 1996, the group had boycotted the Palestinian legislative elections because of their affiliation with the Oslo peace process, which Ḥamās ideologically and militantly opposed. In March 2005, Ḥamās leaders reversed this oppositional stance, justifying their decision by disassociating the 2006 elections from the Oslo peace process, which was declared obsolete. Furthermore, they emphasized the exigencies and benefits for extending its diversified array of activist work within the electoral sphere, which proved to be a significant contribution. Always engaged in humanitarian, social, and educational outreach alongside more militant activities, now added legislative participation to its cache of strategies, which were designed to achieve two core goals: ensuring the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state and improving the plight of Palestinians within and outside of the occupied territories.

Despite Ḥamās's previous rejection of electoral participation at the legislative level, it had neither opposed nor boycotted such participation at the societal, local, or municipal levels; indeed, it had vigorously participated in such elections since its founding. Ḥamās leaders repeatedly called for municipal-level elections during Yasir Arafat's tenure, calls that went unheeded until shortly after his death in 2004. Once such elections were announced, Ḥamās immediately affirmed its participation, launched a well-orchestrated campaign, and eventually achieved numerous electoral victories in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Despite gaining fewer votes overall than Fatah in the municipal elections of 2004–2005, Ḥamās's successful performance signaled two new trends within the Palestinian affairs: the end of Fatah's unilateral political domination and the beginning of Ḥamās's political involvement—perhaps even domination—at the highest levels of the Palestinian government.

Campaign electoral strategies and political agendas were outlined in “The 2005 Electoral Platform for Change and Reform,” a twenty-page document addressing eighteen substantive topics in roughly eight thousand words. With the exception of two themes, “Our Essential Principles” (Article 1) and “Religious Guidance and Preaching” (Article 8), the eighteen other subjects addressed (i.e., domestic policy, administrative reform, legislative policy, educational policy, citizens' rights and liberties) were typical of ordinary secular political movements, both Western and non-Western. The text was notable for its minimal religious and militant content, expansive scope, substantive detail, and predominantly mundane tone, all of which stood in stark contrast to the more inflammatory rhetoric and sectarian-militant phraseology characteristic of older Ḥamas publications, especially its 1988 founding charter. Illustrating a newfound level of political sophistication and intellectual maturity, Ḥamās's Change and Reform agenda represented a new phase in the movement's ideological evolution; namely, an embrace of legislative and electoral politics as additional ways to effect change and ultimately bring about an independent Palestinian state.

Still, mired in controversy since its January 2006 electoral victory, the Change and Reform government prevented Ḥamās from implementing the program outlined in its Electoral Platform. Preoccupied with the ever-present threat of civil war, the increasingly dire effects of an international economic boycott imposed by Israel and the International Quartet (the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia), the detention of many of its elected members by Israel, and intensified Israeli retaliatory

incursions into the Gaza Strip and West Bank, the Ḥamās government was unable to implement substantive components of its agenda.

Instead, during its first year in power, the Ḥamās-led government focused almost exclusively on political survival, leading to numerous attempts to forge a unity government with other Palestinian political factions. After many failed attempts to do so, a national unity government was finally announced, with the assistance of Saudi mediation, in March 2007. Despite hopes that this would lead to the cessation of both the international economic boycott and domestic factional infighting, internal violence and ongoing clashes with the Israeli army escalated, the economic boycott persisted, and international criticism of Ḥamās's involvement in politics continued to mount.

By June 2007, domestic infighting led to the demise of the national unity government formed and headed by Ḥamās and resulted in an unprecedented phenomenon—a military and political split between the Gaza Strip and West Bank, with Ḥamās assuming control of the Gaza Strip and Fatah assuming control of the West Bank. In response to Ḥamās's military takeover of the Gaza Strip, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas dissolved the national unity government, replaced the Ḥamās-appointed prime minister, outlawed Ḥamās's newly appointed security force (the so-called Executive Force), and declared a state of emergency. This internal disunity was exacerbated by the response of Israel and many Western nations, most notably the United States, which moved to further isolate Ḥamās, including its democratically elected politicians, while financially, politically, and militarily bolstering the Fatah-affiliated Abbas. Consequently, Ḥamās's parliamentary bloc remained not only excommunicated but outlawed from participating in the Palestinian government it legitimately and democratically gained access to in the elections of January 2006.

Lingering disputes between the two leading factions lasted into late April 2011 when an accord among eleven Palestinian groups was signed in Cairo, Egypt. Ḥamās and Fatah reached an agreement on April 28, 2011, ending what was a nearly four-year rift that spread death and destruction. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah party and Ḥamās Prime Minister Ismā^ḥil Hanīyah, agreed to hold national elections as soon as possible. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the pact, positing that the agreement dealt a severe blow to the peace process. He also said that his government would withhold tax revenue collected on behalf of the Palestinians until it was certain that the funds would not end up in the hands of Ḥamās. Tensions were high among the principle protagonists, each accusing the other of bad faith. Abbas insisted, nevertheless, that Fatah would set all foreign policy matters in any unity government with Ḥamās, and that the Palestinian Authority would seek a negotiated peace agreement with Israel leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.

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