

Hamas: The Islamist Golem?¹

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Hamas was formed in the late 1980s, as an armed wing of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the transnational Islamist organization founded in Egypt in 1928, which had a small organized presence in Palestine since at least the 1940s. From Gaza, it later spread to the West Bank and nearby places of the Palestinian diaspora, notably Lebanon. To better understand Hamas's history, one needs to examine the socioeconomic conditions, before and after its founding, which made Gaza fertile ground for its birth and later development.

This article does not give an account of those socioeconomic conditions and gradual deterioration over several decades, in Gaza and more generally in the occupied Palestinian territories. This is material for another article, or even books, of which there are many excellent ones. At the end of this article, I make a brief reference to this other work (with appropriate citations), which goes a long way in explaining the profound despair of a closed horizon that the people of Gaza have had to endure over the years, both literally and figuratively, since at least the 1960s.

This article is a chronology of the main events prior and leading to Hamas's emergence, and later until it became Israel's implacable foe by the end of the 1990s. I briefly brush over consolidation of Hamas as the leading resistance organization since the early 2000s, largely a result of misfiring Israeli policies. And I entirely omit Hamas's evolution over the last two decades, as it became more pragmatic, more distant from its religious roots, and more conciliatory towards secular strains of Palestinian resistance. In fact, it also became open to negotiations with Israel for a *de-facto* permanent division of the land – which, of course, runs counter to the common view propagandized by mainstream circles in the United States that Hamas is “dedicated to wiping Israel off the map” and that nothing short of that goal will satisfy it.² This is another important topic outside this article's scope: How Hamas has turned around and accepted the idea of a two-state solution, and what makes American policymakers – against all available evidence – persistently insist that it has not.³

If there is one thing that stands out in Israel's policies regarding Hamas, and the Brotherhood in Gaza of which it is an offshoot, it is that they repeatedly backfired on their originator. This happened predictably time and again – not always immediately, but within months or years or decades – with catastrophic consequences for the Palestinians, of course, but for the Israelis too.

Biding its time and avoiding armed resistance

In September 1973, a pious Palestinian schoolteacher, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, presided over the founding of *al-Mujamma al-Islami* (the “Islamic Gathering” or the “Islamic Gathering Center”) – or *al-Mujamma* for short – at a mosque in Gaza. Yassin was a refugee from al-Jura, a village destroyed in 1948 near the present-day city of Ashkelon in Israel. When he was a university student in Cairo in the late 1950s, Yassin joined the Muslim Brotherhood. After his return to Gaza in 1960 and through his activities in the Brotherhood, Yassin attracted a growing number of loyal followers. Although the Brotherhood had had a presence of sorts in Gaza and the rest of Palestine dating back to the earliest years of its founding,⁴ *al-Mujamma* became henceforth the Brotherhood's front and public face in Gaza.⁵

In contrast to other earlier Palestinian members of the Brotherhood, Yassin adhered to a strict moralizing line in his sermons and preaching, which prioritized spiritual revival over active militancy. He maintained the same moralizing line even after Israel wrested control of Gaza from Egypt in 1967. Earlier Palestinian members of the Brotherhood, who had advocated active militancy and armed struggle, defected from the organization and were among those who founded the *Fatah* group in 1959. By the end of the 1960s, Fatah had become the largest and dominant party of the *Palestine Liberation Organization* (PLO).⁶

It was Fatah and other nationalist groups under the PLO's umbrella, such as the Marxist-oriented *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP), which bore the brunt of resistance to Israel's occupation of Gaza after 1967. Yassin, by-now head of the Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip, categorically refused to join the resistance in any form, despite repeated urgings by the others. Some members of the Brotherhood even saw Egypt's defeat and humiliation in 1967 as deserved punishment of "false prophets of liberation and revolution, deceitful heroes who have misled their people, exiled the preachers of Islam, [and] thrown into prison the purest Muslim youth."⁷

The Israeli army under the command of general Ariel Sharon, then head of the southern region, led a brutal campaign for four long years 1969-1973 to completely pacify Gaza. Known for his ruthlessness and praised by his fellow generals ("the greatest field commander in our history," according to Yitzhak Rabin⁸), Sharon was a man who believed that "our main weapon" for dealing with Palestinians was "the fear of us."⁹ True to his word, Sharon's campaign culminated in the killing of several of the nationalist leaders, the deportation of several hundreds of their followers from Gaza to Jordan, and the forced relocation of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees within the Gaza Strip. Muhammad al-Aswad, known as "Gaza's Guevara" and head of the PFLP's military wing at the time, was killed in March 1973, which marked the end of Gaza's open armed resistance¹⁰ – only temporarily, as it was now only reduced to smoldering embers that would inevitably reignite in later years under a different leadership.

While the nationalist resistance groups were systematically dismantled and decimated, Yassin was taking advantage of Israel's deliberate benign neglect. He was patiently expanding his network of charitable and social activities throughout the Gaza Strip. At the inauguration of al-Mujamma in September 1973, one of the guests of honor was none other than the Israeli military governor of Gaza at the time, general Shmuel Gonen. Israel's obvious aim was to weaken the nationalist camp by encouraging the Islamist alternative. Six years later, in September 1979, the Israeli authorities went even further in boosting al-Mujamma, by recognizing it as a charity organization which could expand its social services openly, including the setting up of schools, clubs, and mosques. Among other significant developments during that period, from 1967 to 1987, the number of mosques in the Gaza Strip rose from 200 to 600,¹¹ all with al-Mujamma's patronage, well-lubricated with funds from reactionary Saudi and Gulf sources.¹²

Israel's divide-and-rule policy was also facilitated by intra-Palestinian conflicts. There were conflicts between Islamists and secular nationalists, and within the latter camp, though all members of the PLO, there were conflicts between pro-communists and anti-communists. Palestinians were thus broadly divided into three political groupings and tendencies. Two of these, the Islamists and the pro-communist nationalists harbored long-standing mutual animosity and irreconcilable differences, with the Islamists at this stage playing a negligible role in resisting Israeli occupation. The third and largest grouping in the middle whose mainstay was Fatah – secular with various strains of third-world leftism

– often played an ambiguous role in this array of forces, sometimes pursuing its own divide-and-rule policy within the Palestinian arena.¹³

In December 1979, Fatah, with strong backing from al-Mujamma, tried and failed in an election to win the presidency of Gaza's Red Crescent Society, whose pro-communist president, Haydar Abdel Shafi, was overwhelmingly reelected. A little over three years later, in January 1983, Fatah tried to turn the tables on al-Mujamma and lost again, this time in student elections won by a coalition (the "Islamic Bloc") organized by al-Mujamma at the Islamic University, one of the two oldest and largest universities in the Gaza Strip.

Arming itself against the PLO

This kind of backstabbing and backstage maneuvering led to frequent clashes between the Islamists of al-Mujamma and the other Palestinian groups in Gaza, throughout the first half of the 1980s. Partly in self-defense, al-Mujamma started to arm itself and gradually moved away from its earlier quietist stance, especially that it was now being challenged by a smaller more radical Islamist group, *Islamic Jihad*, also founded by former members of the Muslim Brotherhood, in 1981, and excluded from the PLO. Initially al-Mujamma focused its attacks on the PFLP and other pro-communist adversaries, but it soon extended its attacks to Fatah and other members of the PLO. Throughout these disturbances in the early 1980s, the Israeli army mostly remained on the sidelines and did not intervene in any decisive way, letting the internal Palestinian bloodletting take its own course unhindered, if not encouraging it.¹⁴

In June 1984, a stealth raid by the Israeli army uncovered dozens of pistols and machine guns hidden in Yassin's mosque. Though primarily intended to intimidate other Palestinian factions, possession of those weapons led to Yassin's arrest and sentencing to thirteen years in prison. In point of fact, he did not complete more than a year of his prison term and was freed in a prisoner exchange in May 1985. But that episode also had a beneficial effect for Yassin. It somewhat tempered accusations he had long endured of profiting from the Israeli occupation and allowed him to polish his reputation and that of al-Mujamma outside Islamist circles.

Following his release from prison in May 1985, Yassin set up an auxiliary security apparatus, *Majd* (acronym for *Munazzamat al-Jihad wa al-Da'wa*), headed by former student leader Yehya Sinwar (Hamás's current leader in Gaza). The function of *Majd* was to protect Islamist social networks from other Palestinian factions and to suppress social deviance (drugs, prostitution, adultery, etc.). Around the same time, increasingly challenged by Islamic Jihad to mount armed resistance, Yassin set up another armed apparatus, *al-Mujahidoon al-Filastiniyyoon* (the "Palestinian fighters"), headed by another former student leader Salah Shehade (assassinated by Israel in 2002), but its militants were quickly rounded up by Israeli authorities and had their arms confiscated. For *Majd*, which was then al-Mujamma's first and only functioning armed branch, the priority thus remained the enemy within, not the Israeli occupier.

Notwithstanding those incidents, the Israeli authorities were still banking on Yassin and al-Mujamma to become willing Israeli enforcers, or if not, then to supplant the PLO which they kept on viewing as the more formidable enemy. In the words of Gaza's military governor (general Yitzhak Segev) in 1986:¹⁵ "We extend some financial aid to Islamic groups via mosques and religious schools in order to help create a force that would stand against the leftist forces which support the PLO."

In an internal memorandum dated March 1984, an advisor (Avner Cohen) of Gaza's Israeli commander described al-Mujamma and the rest of the Islamist network as a *golem*¹⁶ – a creature in Jewish folklore

formed out of lifeless substance which, when brought to life by ritual incantations, ultimately escapes (and in this case, turns against) its creator. From today's vantage point, forty years later, this sounds uncannily prophetic. Perhaps the Islamist threat was not quite a *golem* as described, i.e., not a total creature of Israel, but a preexisting genie which would soon be out of the Israeli bottle, with nothing able to push it back in.

The first Intifada and Hamas's late official beginning

Against the background of a cruel settler-colonial occupation, coupled with deteriorating economic conditions,¹⁷ tensions had been slowly building up to the boiling point by the mid 1980s. The pent-up frustrations, grievances, and endless humiliations, erupted on 8 December 1987: The trigger was an incident in which four Palestinian laborers from Gaza were killed when an Israeli military truck smashed into their cars. Demonstrations broke out in Gaza's Jabaliya refugee camp on the very next day, resulting in more Palestinians injured or killed by the Israeli military. Protests immediately spread like wildfire to the rest of the Gaza Strip and then to the West Bank. The first Intifada was on.¹⁸

Yassin and al-Mujamma were then posed with a dilemma: Either forgo their de-facto accommodation with the Israeli authorities or lose support among Palestinians in general, for whom legitimacy derived from national resistance to occupation, not from piety. After initial hesitation and internal deliberations, Yassin, with the majority of al-Mujamma's most prominent members, resolved the contradiction by announcing the formation of *Hamas* on 14 December 1987, whose stated goal now included national liberation.¹⁹ It was not before another eight months however, in August 1988, that Hamas published a founding manifesto, entitled the *Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement*.²⁰ The Hamas Covenant was a scrambled mixture of the Brotherhood's socially puritanical version of Islam, several concessions to the nationalism espoused by the PLO, and a superficial rehash of Euro-centric antisemitism. It retained all of al-Mujamma's pre-Intifada social agenda, while also blurring the distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism that the PLO's National Charter had insisted on.²¹

The first Intifada was a remarkable uprising, spearheaded by young Palestinians, organized in networks of popular committees throughout the occupied territories.²² They defied the Israeli military with stones and slingshots, not with guns and firearms, thus giving the uprising its commonly used second name, the "Stone Intifada."²³ Despite the Israeli military's violent repression (which involved the use of live ammunition against protesters, the *break-their-bones* policy²⁴ initiated by then-minister of defense Yitzhak Rabin, the mass jailing of demonstrators, punitive curfews and closures), the consensus among local PLO-affiliated groups was against the use of firearms, which remained in place for the entire five-year duration of the uprising.²⁵ Clandestine communiques were distributed at night throughout the territories bearing the signature of a newly formed underground *Unified National Command of the Uprising* (UNCU), which comprised the four principal PLO-affiliated groups: Fatah, the PFLP, the *Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (DFLP), and the *Palestinian Communist Party* (PCP, later renamed *Palestinian People's Party*).²⁶

Significantly, Hamas kept its separate identity and was not part of the UNCU, but it could not remain on the sideline indefinitely without hurting its own standing as a resistance group. It joined protests and boycotts, while also issuing its own separate communiques, only sometimes concordant with those of the UNCU.²⁷ The formation of Hamas's military wing, *Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigades*,²⁸ was more than three years later, in the summer of 1991. Al-Qassam Brigades would inaugurate a new more violent phase in Hamas's trajectory, although Hamas members had already engaged in isolated armed actions in earlier years of the Intifada, as when it carried out two separate armed abductions in 1989 resulting in the killing of two Israeli soldiers.²⁹

Unable to decapitate the local Intifada leadership of the UNCU – secretive, disciplined, and tightly knitted – Israel blamed the uprising on the PLO leadership in its Tunisian exile. “There’s a few hotheads being roused by phone calls from Abu Jihad in Tunis,” declared Yitzhak Rabin.³⁰ Misidentifying the true local leaders of the uprising, Israel started to target PLO officials in the Palestinian diaspora, culminating in the assassination of several top leaders, including one of Fatah’s co-founders (Khalil al-Wazir aka Abu Jihad³¹) in April 1988.³²

Despite the vitriol of its propaganda against Israel, Hamas’s relations with the Israeli authorities remained quietist for many months into the first Intifada, with the Israeli army “never interfering with Hamas’s strike days.”³³ In March 1988, Mahmoud Zahar, a prominent Islamist and co-founder of Hamas, even met with Shimon Peres, then Israel’s minister of foreign affairs, offering a tacit recognition of Israel in exchange for a return to the 1967 borders.³⁴ And again, in the summer of 1988, Mahmoud Zahar and Ibrahim Yazouri, another prominent Islamist figure, had meetings with Yitzhak Rabin.³⁵ For a keen observer at the time, “the purpose of these meetings was to politically undermine the PLO’s claim to being the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” it was not to negotiate an end to the Intifada, as there was no realistic expectation for any group outside the UNCU to be able to single-handedly contain and stop the turmoil in the early stages of the Intifada.³⁶

In late 1988, Hamas chose to abandon those contacts with Israeli officials and to openly demarcate its position from the PLO’s position. Hamas was banking on the failure of any PLO-led negotiation with Israel, while the PLO was now in pursuit of a diplomatically-negotiated independent state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.³⁷ It was not until June 1989, on discovery that Hamas members were behind the abduction and killing of two Israeli soldiers, that Israel finally declared Hamas an illegal movement. This was a year and a half after the uprising’s outbreak, and nearly one year after Israel’s banning of all popular committees affiliated with the PLO and the UNCU. Until then, the Israeli mindset vis-à-vis Hamas had persistently believed it could manipulate a socially conservative movement from morphing into a lethal religious-based armed group.

*Hamas takes center stage after the Oslo Accords*³⁸

The *Declaration of Principles* (DOP), a prelude to the first of two Oslo Accords, was signed by Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin in September 1993.³⁹ It was celebrated with much fanfare and believed by many to usher in a new era of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence. However, the process that culminated with the signing of the DOP – and that famous handshake between Arafat and Rabin, presided over by US President Bill Clinton, on the White House lawn – did not start in Oslo thanks to a Norwegian initiative or the benevolence of some other party. It started in order to overtake and sideline another process – potentially more promising, had it been allowed to succeed – which preceded it by more than two years and culminated with a conference in Madrid in early November 1991, inaugurating a series of meetings over several months attended by both Israeli and Palestinian delegates. The period of the Madrid conference and post-Madrid joint meetings overlapped with the last two years of the Intifada which, in no small measure, made them possible.⁴⁰

The Palestinians involved in formulating the DOP in Oslo were a handful of Arafat loyalists, selected and directed by the Tunis-based PLO, who did not coordinate with the delegates at Madrid and post-Madrid meetings. The Palestinian delegation in Madrid consisted of Palestinians from the occupied territories, unaccountable to the Tunis-based PLO authority though publicly upholding their allegiance to it and led by Haydar Abdel Shafi, probably the most respected figure in Palestine at the time. The DOP negotiators effectively blindsided the Madrid delegates, at least the Palestinians among them, as

well as those who had led the Intifada on the ground. The secretive Oslo meetings were in part an attempt to reestablish the Tunis-based PLO authority, which had tried (with US prodding⁴¹) to exert some control over the Intifada from its Tunisian exile but with little success.⁴²

The two letters exchanged by Arafat and Rabin prior to the DOP were an omen of things to come, none too hopeful from a Palestinian perspective.⁴³ Intentionally or not, their contents reflected the extreme imbalance between the two sides – which side would dictate the terms of post-Oslo Israeli-Palestinian relations and which side would submit to those terms. Rabin's letter was just one sentence, stating that “the Government of Israel has decided to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people,” and said nothing about the history of violence and dispossession inflicted on the Palestinians. Arafat's letter was more than 15 lines long, pledging to renounce many things inimical to Israeli policies, including “the use of terrorism and other acts of violence and will assume responsibility over all PLO elements and personnel in order to assure their compliance, prevent violations and discipline violators.”⁴⁴ The stage was now set for turning the PLO, and its successor *Palestinian Authority* (PA), into an enforcer of Israeli rule. As expressed by a prominent leftwing Palestinian activist, “Oslo was the greatest idea Israel ever had. It let them continue the occupation without paying any of the costs.”⁴⁵

By the time the second Oslo Accord was signed in September 1995, the spirit and hopes that motivated the Madrid conference, at least on the Palestinian side, had effectively evaporated.⁴⁶ Trust in the Tunis-based PLO leadership was irrevocably broken, now out in the open, and marked the beginning of a Palestinian unraveling whose effects persist to this day. Haydar Abdel Shafi had already refused to attend the celebrations on the White House lawn in September 1993. Several members of the PLO executive committee had resigned, including Mahmoud Darwish, widely viewed as Palestine's national poet. And the co-opting of the first Intifada's legacy had been bitterly and publicly denounced by many Palestinians, most eloquently by Edward Said, who called the Oslo Accords “an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles.”⁴⁷

If the foregoing text reflects a negative assessment of Madrid and Oslo by prominent Palestinians, it is worth noting that some Israelis shared that assessment, even when they drew different implications for the future. On the Madrid conference, the journalist Danny Rubinstein, a well-informed analyst of the occupied territories at the time, wrote that the US and Israel would agree to some form of Palestinian “autonomy,” but that it would be “autonomy as in a POW camp, where the prisoners are ‘autonomous’ to cook their meals without interference and to organize cultural events.”⁴⁸ On the Oslo process, the historian and later government minister Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote (approvingly!) that “in practice, the Oslo agreements were founded on a neo-colonialist basis, on a life of dependence of one on the other forever,” designed to impose on the Palestinians “almost total dependence on Israel,” creating “an extended colonial situation.”⁴⁹ An exponent of the anti-Zionist Marxist left, Moshe Machover, wrote that “the sad truth is that Yasser Arafat signed on the dotted line, if not as a conscious act of capitulation then as a result of self-delusion,” and that the aim of the Oslo Accords “was evidently the creation of a kind of Indian reservation, or a disconnected set of such reservations, policed on Israel's behalf by Arafat and his CIA-trained security forces.”⁵⁰ A tiny glimmer of hope perhaps: When free of ideological blinders, Israelis can join Palestinians in seeing eye to eye on the latter's plight – as in this case, when some Israelis (admittedly, a tiny few!) recognized the ominous reality that Madrid and Oslo portended.

A major beneficiary of the Oslo agreements and post-Oslo period was undoubtedly Hamas, as the main party that did not fall for an illusory peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. The banner of resistance was now left to an emboldened Hamas, further enhanced by its exclusion from a discredited PLO. While Islamism had been a minor, if not insignificant, strain in Palestinian politics up until the

late 1970s or early 1980s, Hamas became the main party of resistance to Israeli occupation by the early 2000s.

Boosted by Israel's campaign of assassinations

The Israeli investigative journalist Ronen Bergman reported that more than 2,700 individuals have been shot, poisoned, or blown up to pieces, by Israel since its founding in 1948.⁵¹ This is a terrifying history that dwarfs the records of all of Israel's opponents put together. The eagerness to murder, as opposed to pursue other options such as diplomacy or compromise, appears compulsive – and pointless given the unavoidable reactions after every assassination. While the consequences may be infuriating for the Palestinians and satisfying for the Israelis, but only in the immediate, they are counterproductive in the long run for Israel itself.

For a particular case that boomeranged spectacularly, one needs to look no further than Lebanon. In 1992, the Israelis decided to kill Abbas Musawi who was the leader of a nascent Hezbollah, and they did indeed kill him, along with his wife and five year-old son.⁵² But the leader who replaced him, Hassan Nasrallah, turned out to be a far more formidable opponent. In addition to organizing a powerful guerilla force and deftly inserting himself in internal Lebanese politics, Nasrallah has surrounded himself with a team of sophisticated advisors, some of whom, for example, have the sole function of reading and summarizing the Israeli (Hebrew) press on a daily basis for his perusal.⁵³

For years, Israel has targeted and killed Hamas leaders, just as it had targeted and killed PLO leaders in earlier decades, up until the Oslo Accords. In the words of Andrew Cockburn, a long-time commentator on military affairs: "Israel has long been addicted to assassination."⁵⁴ He calls it an "addiction" because Israel has never seemed to take pause to assess and reconsider its strategy of targeted killings, even when it has suffered immediate disastrous blowback effects. Israel has repeatedly failed to decapitate Hamas because "over the decades Hamas has developed (a) a resilient and notably collegial leadership that is not destroyed by the killing of one or even half a dozen individuals, and (b) a very effective leadership-training process that means that for any one leader killed there are a dozen with the capacity to take over. The effectiveness of this process was clearly demonstrated in Hamas' intricately planned and devastating assault on October 7."⁵⁵

So, when Israel decided to assassinate Hamas's deputy political leader, Saleh al-Arouri, in Beirut on January 2 of this year, one is at a loss to understand what Israel was trying to achieve – why in that precise place and time – unless it acted out of sheer compulsive vendetta and damn all possible consequences. The stakes are very high this time, as the assassination of al-Arouri may be the trigger for an all out war with Hezbollah.

Boosted by Israel's divide-and-rule policies

Playing on internal Palestinian tensions to weaken resistance to its rule has been a constant of Israel's policies. Until the beginning of the first Intifada and for more than a year after it, Israel still banked on Hamas and the Islamists to counter the nationalists and the leftists affiliated with the Fatah-dominated PLO – with Hamas and the Islamists coming out stronger by the end of that game.

After the 1993-1995 Oslo Accords, Israeli policy took a different turn, as it was now dealing with two rival Palestinian centers of authority, the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas. In 2006 Hamas beat Fatah in Legislative Council elections, as the latter was increasingly perceived as a

subcontractor for Israeli occupation, which soon led to factional fighting and the eventual division of the Palestinian territories under two separate administrations: Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah-led PA in Ramallah. Even though the PA acted in coordination with Israel and as enforcer of the latter's rule, Israel also worked on keeping it weak and unable to compete with Hamas in Gaza.

All Israeli leaders have tried to play the divide-and-rule game, but perhaps none played it as deviously and myopically as Netanyahu. "Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas," he told an audience of Likud members in March 2019. "This is part of our strategy – to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank," he declared.⁵⁶ The strategy bolstered Hamas, as expected, until it blew up in Netanyahu's face on October 7.

It is not possible to ignore the socioeconomic context, largely bypassed in this article, which made Gaza a most fertile ground for Hamas's emergence and development. I will leave it to the Gaza scholar, Sara Roy, to summarize that context in two short paragraphs:⁵⁷

The current desecration of Gaza is the latest stage in a process that has taken increasingly violent forms over time. In the fifty-six years since it occupied the Strip in 1967, Israel has transformed Gaza from a territory politically and economically integrated with Israel and the West Bank into an isolated enclave, from a functional economy to a dysfunctional one, from a productive society to an impoverished one. It has likewise removed Gaza's residents from the sphere of politics, transforming them from a people with a nationalist claim to a population whose majority requires some form of humanitarian aid to sustain themselves.

Violence in Gaza has not only or even primarily been a military matter, as it is now. It has been a matter of everyday, ordinary acts: the struggle to access water and electricity, feed one's children, find a job, get to school safely, reach a hospital, even bury a loved one. For decades the pressure on Palestinians in Gaza has been immense and unrelenting. The damage it has done – high levels of unemployment and poverty, widespread infrastructural destruction, and environmental degradation, including dangerous contamination of water and soil, among other factors – has become a permanent condition.

A longer study of the socioeconomic context in which Hamas's history unfolded is in several books.⁵⁸

- ¹ In writing this article, I have borrowed freely from the work of others I have long appreciated. Besides my own experience of having lived through or nearby many of the early recounted events, I have relied mostly, but not only, on the excellent writings of several scholars. Most notably among the latter are Rashid Khalidi (Department of History, Columbia University), Jean-Pierre Filiu (Middle East Studies, Paris School of International Affairs), and Sara Roy (Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University), whose statements I could also corroborate from my own reading of texts in Arabic. I finalized the article after taking into account careful comments from three friends and fellow mathematical scientists who read a preliminary draft – Ahmed Abbes, Oded Goldreich, and Haynes Miller.
- ² An influential proponent of that view is the columnist Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times*. See, for example, his column, “[Only Biden and M.B.S. Can Redirect the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#),” *NY Times*, Feb. 13, 2024. And he invariably expresses that view in alarmist terms, as in his statement that Hamas is “a movement dedicated to wiping out the Jewish state forever,” in his column “[A Peace Initiative Emerges Out of Deadly Violence](#),” *NY Times*, Feb. 15, 2024.
- ³ There are many studies of Hamas’s evolution in the last two decades. For a short summary of a few pages, see Fawaz A. Gerges, “[The Transformation of Hamas](#),” *The Nation*, January 7, 2010. For an even shorter account, from a distinctly conservative establishment perspective, see Aaron David Miller, “[Is Hamas Rebranding with New Manifesto?](#)” *Wilson Center Report*, May 2, 2017. Unsurprisingly, Miller does not draw the same conclusions as Gerges; in particular, Miller is skeptical of Hamas’s stated acceptance of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders unless it also accepts to disarm itself (suggesting that, in this regard, it should follow the old PLO’s example, by peacefully disarming itself). A thorough and honest book-length study of Hamas’s evolution over the last two decades is Tareq Baconi, [Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance](#), Stanford University Press, 2018.
- ⁴ Mohsen Mohammad Saleh, [Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimoun Al-Filastiniyyoun: Al-Tanzeem Al-Filastini – Qita’ Ghazza](#) (“The Palestinian Muslim Brothers: The Palestinian Organization – Gaza Strip”), *Zaytouna Center*, Beirut 2020, pp. 27-40. Other authors mark the earliest activities of the Brotherhood in Gaza (and in other parts of Palestine) in the year 1943 and 1944, see for example, Khaled Hroub, [Hamas, A Beginner’s Guide](#), Pluto Press, London 2010, p. 8.
- ⁵ Until the founding of Hamas in December 1987, I will stress al-Mujamma as the distinctive face of the Brotherhood in Gaza, separate from the Brotherhood’s presence in other parts of Palestine. And in this, I follow the example of Jean-Pierre Filiu, [The Origins of Hamas: Militant Legacy or Israeli Tool?](#) *J. of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XLI, No. 3 (Spring 2012), pp. 54–70.
- ⁶ In later years, especially after 1967 when new and younger members joined Fatah, secular and free of any Brotherhood connection, Fatah distanced itself further from the Brotherhood and its ideology. “Even if the birth of Fatah took place within a Brotherhood environment [in 1959], Fatah was neither established by a decision of the Brotherhood, nor according to their plan. Fatah’s project did not carry the Brotherhood’s ideology, nor the limitations that ensure that this project would serve their goals” in Mohsen Mohammad Saleh, *op. cit.*, p. 278.
- ⁷ Adnan Abu Amir, [Al-Haraka Al-Islamiyya fi Qita’ Ghazza](#) (“The Islamic Movement in the Gaza Strip”), *Markaz Al-A’lam Al-Arabi*, Cairo 2006, p. 17.
- ⁸ Wikipedia article, [Ariel Sharon](#), the statement by Yitzhak Rabin is in the first paragraph, with appropriate references.
- ⁹ Tom Segev, [1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East](#), *Google Books*, p. 281. Ariel Sharon is most remembered by Palestinians for his role in a long blood-soaked history of atrocities dating back to the 1950s, including Qibya, Sabra, Shatila, and of course Gaza. He made the quoted comment in a meeting of top-level Israeli officers who, whenever referring to Palestinians or Arabs, would say similar outlandishly demeaning and racist comments, such as this one by general Uzi Narkis: “They’re a bubble of soap, and with one pin-prick they’ll burst,” Tom Segev, *op. cit.*, p. 284. This kind of myopic view that military might can finish off an indigenous people’s resistance and would not boomerang sooner or later – unless they are all physically liquidated – is arguably stronger among all Zionist parties today than it was decades ago.
- ¹⁰ Yezid Sayigh, [Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949-1993](#), Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 286-287.
- ¹¹ Ziad Abu Amr, “[Hamas: A Historical and Political Background](#),” *J. of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 4, 1993, p. 8.

- ¹² Jean-Pierre Filiu, [“Why Gaza Matters.”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 103, No. 1, January/February 2024, p. 9/13. J.-P. Filiu further elaborates the ways in which Israel was playing off the Brotherhood led by Yassin against the Fatah-dominated PLO.
- ¹³ Information in this paragraph is including in several books, with further details, notably in: Jean-Pierre Filiu, [Gaza, A History](#), Oxford University Press, 2014; Leila Seurat, [The Foreign Policy of Hamas](#), I.B. Tauris, 2022 (first published in France under the title “Hamas et le monde”, CNRS, 2019), Chapter 1; and Yezid Sayigh, [Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949-1993](#), Oxford University Press, 1997, Part III, pp. 329-552.
- ¹⁴ Salim Tamari, [“What the Uprising Means,”](#) *Middle East Report*, May-June 1988, p. 29.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Mehdi Hassan, [“Blowback: How Israel Went from Helping Create Hamas to Bombing it.”](#) *The Intercept*, Feb. 19, 2018.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Jean-Pierre Filiu, [“The Origin of Hamas: Militant Legacy or Israeli Tool,”](#) *J. of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XLI, No. 3, Spring 2012, p. 55. Also quoted in Charles Enderlin, [Le Grand Aveuglement: Israël et l'irrésistible ascension de l'islam radical](#), Albin Michel, 2009, p. 117.
- ¹⁷ One of the very best accounts of Gaza’s socioeconomic conditions and its systematic de-development over several decades is Sara Roy, [The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development \(Expanded Third Edition\)](#), Institute of Palestine Studies, 2016. A careful reader (Oded Goldreich) of a preliminary draft of this article, and keen observer of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, pointed out that the strategy of blocking Gaza’s development and ensuring its long-term inferiority was in effect in all Palestinian areas, not only Gaza, under Israeli occupation.
- ¹⁸ Roger Heacock, [The First Intifada, 1987-1993, Exhilaration of Revolt, Promise of Freedom](#), in [The Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question](#). The references therein include several detailed analyses of the political circumstances and socioeconomic conditions that led to the eruption of the first Intifada.
- ¹⁹ The internal deliberations in the leadership of al-Mujamma are recounted in Khaled Hroub, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13. The name *Hamas* is an Arabic acronym of *Harakat Al-Muqawama Al-Islamiyya* (the “Islamic Resistance Movement”) which, as a word, also means “enthusiasm” or “ardor”.
- ²⁰ Muhammad Maqdsi, [“Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement \(Hamas\) of Palestine,”](#) *J. of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Summer 1993, pp. 122-134.
- ²¹ In 2017, Hamas issued a much anticipated follow-up to its 1988 Covenant, entitled a [Document of General Principles and Policies](#). Though still imbued with many conservative Islamic references, the Document describes the conflict with Israel in terms that are more political than religious, and includes explicit statements to counter the antisemitic tone of the earlier Covenant, such as “Hamas affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project not with the Jews because of their religion.” For many years after 1988, its official pronouncements were in fact at odds with its founding manifesto. Some [long-time observers](#) of Hamas’s history have argued that “there was nothing really new in the [new Document of 2017]. It really just was a place in which everything the movement had been articulating to date was sort of put to paper.”
- ²² It is worth pointing out that the “Intifada was not limited to opposing the occupation; it was also a social revolution within Palestinian society, breaking patterns of subordination of women, authority by notables, and other forms of hierarchy and domination” (Noam Chomsky, [“The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences,”](#) in P. Bauck and M. Omer eds., *The Oslo Accords 1993-2013*, The American University in Cairo Press, 2013, page 3).
- ²³ In contrast to the [second Intifada](#) of 2000-2005, or *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, which involved large amounts of weapons, ambushes, deadly Israeli reprisals, suicide bombings, and far larger numbers of killed and injured than during the first Intifada. The term “Intifada” has been periodically used to refer to periods of increased Palestinian protests, especially when they turn into large-scale mobilizations across several regions of Palestinian concentration, such as during the [third Intifada](#) of 2021, also called the [Unity Intifada](#).
- ²⁴ Anita Vitullo Khoury, [“Yitzhak Rabin and Israel’s Death Squads,”](#) *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 178, Sept./Oct. 1992.

- ²⁵ The first armed ambush carried out by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which led to the death of three Israeli soldiers, was in December 1992 towards the end of the first Intifada (J.-P. Filiu, *Gaza, A History*, Oxford Univ Press, 2014, p. 216). Suicide bombings, separate from armed ambushes, became a common tactic of Islamist groups (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) and lone-wolf terrorists, which often failed or aborted. The first suicide bombing in Gaza was in September 1993, carried out by Hamas (J.-P. Filiu, *Gaza, A History*, Oxford Univ Press, 2014, p. 219). The first suicide bombing outside Gaza was a few months earlier, in April 1993, in the Jordan Valley settlement of Mekhola. There were 19 suicide bombings throughout the period 1994-97. By contrast, there were 138 suicide bombings during the second Intifada of 2000-05. This information is taken from Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, “Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada,” *Social Forces*, June 2006, Vol. 84, No. 4. All of the reported suicide bombings involved Islamist groups.
- ²⁶ Roger Heacock, *op. cit.* References therein include engrossing accounts of how local leadership cadres quickly emerged, leading young Palestinians to act with discipline and commitment in response to military and settler assaults. An eloquent description of what the first Intifada represents in Palestinian collective imagination is in Edward Said, “Intifada and Independence,” *Social Text*, Spring 1989, No. 22, pp. 37-38-39.
- ²⁷ Roger Heacock, *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ Official website of [Al-Qassam Brigades](#), which covers its history and its relationship with Hamas. The website contents in English are translations of the same contents of the website in Arabic – click [here](#). The latter includes graphics and videos not available in the website in English.
- ²⁹ Wikipedia, [Killing of Avi Sasportas and Ilan Saadon](#).
- ³⁰ Salim Tamari, “What the Uprising Means,” *Middle East Report*, May-June 1988, p. 27.
- ³¹ Wikipedia page, [Khalil al-Wazir](#), is accurate and reflects what is known of him from Arabic sources.
- ³² The assassination campaign carried out by Israel during the years of the first Intifada is recounted in Ronen Bergman, [Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations](#), Random House, 2018. Although each of its chapters reads like a script for a James Bond movie, the book contains information not readily available elsewhere. For the years of the first Intifada, the relevant parts are the middle chapters of the book, two or three before and after Chapter 19, entitled “Intifada.”
- ³³ Zeev Schiff, Ehud Yaari, *Intifada, The Palestinian Uprising – Israel's Third Front*, Simon and Schuster, 1990, p. 234.
- ³⁴ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza, A History*, Oxford Univ Press, 2014, p. 206.
- ³⁵ Graham Usher, *Dispatches From Palestine, The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process*, Pluto Press, 1999, p. 20.
- ³⁶ Graham Usher, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2, footnote 13.
- ³⁷ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza, A History*, Oxford Univ Press, 2014, p. 206-207.
- ³⁸ Much of the information in this section is presented and elaborated in gripping details in Rashid Khalidi, [The Hundred Years' War on Palestine](#), Metropolitan Books / Henry Holt and Company, 2020, Chap. 5, entitled “The Fifth Declaration of War, 1987-1995.”
- ³⁹ The DOP is often considered a separate document from the first Oslo Accord. “The DOP terminated the public Madrid talks and set in motion a series of agreements know in common parlance as the Oslo Agreements: the 1994 Gaza-Jericho Agreement (Oslo I), the 1995 Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II, or Taba agreement), and the January 1997 Hebron Protocol, the October 1998 Wye River Memorandum, and the September 1999 Sharm el Sheik Memorandum. Oslo II was by far the broadest and most concrete agreement concluded between the PLO and Israel” (Allegra Pacheco, “Flouting Convention: The Oslo Agreements,” in *The New Intifada, Resisting Israel's Apartheid*, edited by Roane Carey, 2001, Chap. 10).
- ⁴⁰ As is often the case with propitious developments, there were other events that converged with the Intifada and paved the way to the Madrid conference and post-Madrid joint meetings. In particular, in November 1988, the Palestinian

National Council (PNC) had adopted a declaration calling for a Palestinian state to be established in the territories occupied by Israeli in 1967. The PNC declaration, which accepted the overwhelming international consensus at the time on a diplomatic settlement, was virtually the same as the two-state solution brought to the Security Council in January 1976 by the Arab “confrontation states,” Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, and vetoed by the US in 1980. However, a decade later, with a sustained and unflagging Intifada, rejectionism by the US and Israel of a two-state solution, with direct Palestinian participation in negotiating it, was becoming increasingly untenable (Noam Chomsky, “*The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences*,” in P. Bauck and M. Omer eds., *The Oslo Accords 1993-2013*, The American University in Cairo Press, 2013).

- ⁴¹ The US Ambassador to Tunisia at the time, Robert Pelletreau, informed Arafat in June 1988 that, “undoubtedly the internal struggles that we are witnessing in the occupied territories aim to undermine the security and stability of the State of Israel, and we therefore demand cessation of those riots, which we view as terrorist acts against Israel. This is especially true as we know you are directing, from outside the territories, those riots which are sometimes very violent” (quoted in N. Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, South End Press, 1989, Appendix V, p. 230).
- ⁴² If there ever was a period that seemed to hold the potential of a negotiated and hopeful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however slim its chances were of being realized, it was the period of the Madrid conference and post-Madrid meetings shortly after. It is no coincidence that that period overlapped with the last two years of the first Intifada, which raised Palestinian hopes and provided momentum for envisioning something different and better, even if still short of a relationship of true parity between Israelis and Palestinians. Although the spirit and hopes of the Madrid conference were not preordained to fail, they were repeatedly stymied and undermined during the rest of the decade, and their ultimate failure were unavoidably to Hamas’s benefit and enhanced status.
- ⁴³ The letters are available in full on Wikipedia, [Israel–Palestine Liberation Organization letters of recognition](#).
- ⁴⁴ It is interesting which of the two letters mentions “terrorism” and which does not. In respectable mainstream circles, violence by the colonized is always condemned as “terrorism,” while state violence by the colonizer is invariably excused as “counter-terrorism.” Terrorism is “bad and immoral,” counter-terrorism is “good and virtuous,” even if the latter is pursued (as in Israel’s case) with tanks, jet fighters, and a nuclear-armed military backed by the single most powerful nuclear-armed military in the history of the world. The truth is different: Violence of a colonized indigenous people, in the face of increased marginalization and dispossession, is response to violence initiated by encroaching colonizers – and this is what has happened in Palestine over more than a century – and this is not to ignore that violence by the colonizer and counter-violence by the colonized have both taken ugly and heinous forms.
- ⁴⁵ Those are the words of Mustafa Barghouti. Secretary-general of the [Palestinian National Initiative](#).
- ⁴⁶ The Oslo Accords were carefully crafted by Israeli negotiators, with US backing, with unclear and sometimes conflicting provisions, escape hatches, and vague reciprocity conditions, in such a way as to make it possible that Israel was not strictly violating the accords. In contrast, the concessions by the Palestinians were far-reaching. A thorough analysis of the Oslo Accords, especially the crucial Oslo II Accord, is in “Epilogue: Middle East Diplomacy,” in N. Chomsky, *World Orders, Old and New*, Pluto Press, 1997, pp. 464-503.
- ⁴⁷ Edward Said, “[The Morning After](#),” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 15, No. 20, 21 Oct. 1993. In fairness, it was not all segments of Palestinian society that had a dim view of the Oslo process. Many did not share Edward Said’s scathing criticism; however, whatever disagreements they may have had with him, they didn’t voice them publicly. Initially, in the midst of all the front-page celebrations, it was probably a majority of Palestinians who were carried away by promises of a new future where Palestinians and Israelis would coexist in harmony.
- ⁴⁸ Danny Rubinstein, *Haaretz*, October 23, 1991.
- ⁴⁹ Shlomo Ben-Ami, *A Place for All* (Hebrew), Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998. Cited in N. Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New*, South End Press, new edition, 2002, p. 98.
- ⁵⁰ Moshe Machover, *Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Resolution*, Haymarket Books, 2012, p. 253.
- ⁵¹ Ronen Bergman, [Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel’s Targeted Assassinations](#), Random House, 2018. Bergman writes in the style of a script for a James Bond movie, where murderers seem extolled for their prowess and never to draw the writer’s moral opprobrium. A more sobering and less movie-like account, though much shorter than

Bergman's, is Andrew Cockburn, "[Defining Insanity, Again](#)," in *Spoils of War*, Substack, January 4, 2024.

- ⁵² Israel Shahak, "[The Musawi Assassination: A Foretelling of Israel's New Policies in Lebanon](#)," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, June 8, 1992.
- ⁵³ Assaf Kfoury, "Meeting Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah: 'Encounter with a Fighter'," in *Inside Lebanon: Journey to a Shattered Land with Noam and Carol Chomsky*, ed. A. Kfoury, Monthly Review Press, 2007, Chapter 6.
- ⁵⁴ Andrew Cockburn, "[Defining Insanity, Again](#)," in *Spoils of War*, Substack, January 4, 2024.
- ⁵⁵ Andrew Cockburn, *op. Cit.*
- ⁵⁶ Gidi Weitz, "[Another Concept Implodes: Israel Can't Be Managed by a Criminal Defendant](#)," *Haaretz*, Oct 9, 2023.
- ⁵⁷ Sara Roy, "[The Long War on Gaza](#)," *New York Review of Books*, Dec 19, 2023. The quoted paragraphs in the text are the third and fourth in Sara Roy's article.
- ⁵⁸ Foremost among these references is Sara Roy, [The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development \(Expanded Third Edition\)](#), Institute of Palestine Studies, 2016. Though not narrowly focused on socioeconomic conditions in Gaza, but complementary to Sara Roy's work are: Amira Haas, [Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land Under Siege](#), Henry Holt and Company, 2000; Norman Finkelstein, [Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom](#), University of California Press, 2021; and, for a book covering socioeconomic conditions in both Gaza and the West Bank, Andy Clarno, [Neoliberal Apartheid: Palestine/Israel and South Africa after 1994](#), University of Chicago Press, 2017.