

H A M A S
VS.
F A T A H

**THE STRUGGLE
FOR PALESTINE**

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Glossary</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
Introduction: Islamism vs. Palestinian Nationalism	1
Chapter One: The Roots of Hamas and Fatah	13
Chapter Two: Hamas, Fatah, and the First Intifada	23
Chapter Three: Hamas under Fire	31
Chapter Four: Hamas, Fatah, and the Oslo Years	37
Chapter Five: History Repeats: The 2000 Intifada	49
Chapter Six: <i>Fitna</i>	65
Chapter Seven: Hamas Digs In	79
Chapter Eight: Prelude to War	95
Chapter Nine: Hamas Conquers Gaza	107
Chapter Ten: Fatah's West Bank	121
Chapter Eleven: The Threat of al-Qaeda in Gaza	131
Chapter Twelve: The Gaza–West Bank Split	143
Chapter Thirteen: Annapolis and the Hope for Peace	155
Chapter Fourteen: The Effect of Sanctions	163
Chapter Fifteen: The Winds of War	173

Chapter Sixteen: The Prospects for Change from Within	181
Conclusion: Between <i>Fitna</i> and Fulfillment	191
<i>About the Author</i>	197
<i>Notes</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	237

INTRODUCTION

ISLAMISM VS. PALESTINIAN NATIONALISM

On January 26, 2006, an estimated 3,000 Palestinians aligned with Hamas marched through the West Bank town of Ramallah, chanting Hamas slogans and waving green flags emblazoned with the Hamas logo. Onlookers from the Fatah organization, the longtime ruling party, watched in disbelief. Only the night before, Fatah's supporters had driven through Manarah Square and fired celebratory gunshots into the air. According to polling data, Fatah would win the Palestinian legislative elections by a comfortable margin.

The following morning, however, it was Hamas that was celebrating. The polls had been wrong. Indeed, Hamas had won an overwhelming electoral victory. Frenzied supporters of the group, most known for its headline-grabbing suicide bombing tactics against Israel, chanted euphorically outside the Palestinian Legislative Council building. In a move that was seen as both disrespectful and audacious, the revelers raised the green Hamas flag over the building. Infuriated, Fatah supporters tried to lower the banner. A 30-minute struggle ensued, with the two sides throwing stones and breaking windows until Palestinian security fired warning shots into the air.

For months following the election, tensions between the two groups remained high. Fatah, the longtime power broker in the Palestinian territories—the West Bank and Gaza—refused to hand over the reins of power. Hamas, for its part, insisted that its landslide electoral victory had granted it

legitimate control over the Palestinian Authority (PA), the governing structure for the territories. A conflict had been set in motion.

More than one year later, on June 7, 2007, forces loyal to the Hamas terrorist organization launched a military offensive against Fatah in Gaza, taking command of major arteries, commandeering the media, and assuming control over PA government buildings and installations. Four days into the fighting, after a series of pitched battles, Hamas gunmen clad in black ski masks controlled the dusty streets. It would not be long before the fall of the PA's fortress-like security compound, al-Suraya. Indeed, Hamas fighters had burrowed a tunnel beneath the building, detonated deadly explosives, and breached it. After just six days of fighting, all of the Gaza Strip was under Hamas control.

The violence between Hamas and Fatah came as a surprise to many observers. Innumerable news reports out of the Middle East over the years focused only on the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The Palestinians have traditionally been viewed as maintaining a united front and, in the words of Rashid Khalidi, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Columbia University, a “uniform Palestinian identity.”¹

Khalidi and many other sympathetic observers of Palestinian politics could not have been more wrong. A critical view of Palestinian history, particularly over the last two decades, reveals that the Palestinians are a house divided, marked by sharp political differences and sporadic political violence. While many analysts have dismissed these differences as minor or insignificant over the years, the June 2007 violence was an unmistakable milestone. It was a clear and outward manifestation of a civil war that had gone undeclared for years. The battle between Fatah and Hamas was not simply a territorial conflict. It was not a misunderstanding. It was a bitter battle in a wider power struggle between two rival Palestinian factions known to hold two diametrically different ideological positions with regard to the role of religion and politics in what is commonly referred to as the struggle for Palestine.

The June violence was not a milestone simply because it was the first time that the Palestinians engaged in open warfare against one another. It also changed the way Middle East observers would interpret events that took

place within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, responsible decisions about the conflict or prescriptions for its settlement cannot be issued without taking into account the internal violence between the Palestinians.

In fact, conflict between the two most influential Palestinian factions must be, and always should have been, a critical component to understanding the Arab-Israeli conflict. As this book demonstrates, the Fatah and Hamas factions have been locked in a power struggle since 1987. However, this crucial facet of the “struggle for Palestine” has gone drastically underreported.

The internal Palestinian power struggle has been downplayed for a number of reasons. Some might blame America’s intelligence services for failing to recognize this important subplot to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, even if U.S. intelligence had a good handle on this issue, such information would likely remain classified. Similarly, the Israelis could be expected to keep their intelligence closely guarded.

The blame might fall, in part, on the shoulders of the myriad journalists covering the conflict over the years. The mainstream media should unquestionably accept some responsibility for missing this story. America’s television networks, newspapers, and magazines have spent countless man-hours sensationalizing the acrimonious fight between Palestinians and Israelis. The story sells. But how often did intra-Arab fighting make front-page headlines in the *New York Times*? The genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan beginning in 2003 is a telling example of how important stories can become journalistic backwaters if they fail to capture the imagination of American consumers or advertisers.

In all fairness to the journalists, perhaps they did not have access. In 2006, free press watchdog Reporters Without Frontiers ranked the Palestinian Authority 134 of a total of 169 countries or territories surveyed, with number 169 having the worst freedom of the press.² As a result of draconian Palestinian press measures, most foreign and local reporters in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip do not enjoy access to unsavory aspects of Palestinian politics, but are provided ample opportunity to report on purported Israeli abuses of Palestinian rights throughout the disputed territories. Only a

few journalists found ways to report on this conflict with color and clarity. Of them, Khaled Abu Toameh of the *Jerusalem Post* and Sarah El Deeb of the Associated Press deserve special mention for consistently finding stories that few others did.

In academia, hundreds of Arabic-speaking professors and researchers have spent millions of dollars in fellowship funds to travel to the West Bank and Gaza over the years. Only a handful chose to analyze the potential for a Palestinian civil war. Notably, Mahmood Monshipouri, of little-known Alma College in Michigan, published an article in 1996 entitled “The PLO Rivalry with Hamas.”³ Don Peretz of the State University of New York in Binghamton also predicted a clash between Hamas and Fatah, noting that “internecine conflict will very likely erupt among them when the time comes for the Palestinians to determine their political future.”⁴

Unfortunately, most of the professorate has produced streams of anti-Israel diatribe but very little critical work on the internal Palestinian dynamic. Some critics charged that professors of Middle Eastern studies had an ax to grind and that their research had a naked political agenda. One noted Middle East scholar, Martin Kramer, wrote an entire book about the problem, entitled *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, which documents the shortcomings of many of America’s Middle East scholars. Kramer notes that the political agenda of these professors caused them to commit a litany of crucial errors in recent years. Among their recent failings, he believes, the academy consistently downplayed the deadly impact of Islamism and minimized the dangers of terrorism coming out of the Arab world.⁵

Tellingly, after the Hamas conquest of Gaza in June 2007, several Middle East studies professors argued that the Gaza coup was a positive development. They argued that the violence was a signal that it was time to start a dialogue with Hamas, which they viewed as a force for Palestinian democracy. Notably, Harvard University’s Sara Roy and Boston University’s Augustus Richard Norton wrote a piece in the *Christian Science Monitor* entitled “Yes, You Can Work with Hamas.”⁶

These professors, and scores of others, seem to ignore that Hamas is a violent, totalitarian organization that has taken the lives of hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians over the years and vows to continue down that same path. Similarly, in the early 1990s, many Middle Eastern studies professors

insisted that Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were prepared to renounce violence, even as these groups continued to openly call for Israel's destruction.

What the professors did not grasp then, and do not grasp now, is that radical Islam and the modern incarnation of Palestinian nationalism are both dangerous ideologies. These two worldviews were behind countless acts of violence against Israelis in recent decades. By 2007, they were also responsible for many acts of violence against Palestinians. According to B'tselem, an Israeli human rights group, more than 330 Palestinians were killed in internecine fighting between Hamas and Fatah in 2007, with thousands more wounded.⁷ Scores of additional casualties were reported in 2008, although numbers were not readily available at the time of this writing.

The driving ideological force behind Hamas (which is an acronym for *Harakat al-Muqawamma al-Islamiyya*, meaning "Islamic Resistance Movement") is radical Islam. Radical Islam, as Americans have learned since September 11, 2001, is an expansionist and utopian ideology that often justifies violence in the name of what is commonly recognized as a peaceful religion. Those who embrace this ideology seek to implement a strict interpretation of the Quran (Islam's holy book) and *shari'a* (Islamic law) in all Muslim lands. This can include interpretations of laws that stipulate the subjugation of women, poor treatment of minorities, as well as a strong disdain for non-Muslim cultures. Islamists also seek a united Muslim polity, spearheaded by the leadership of a caliph, that would one day dominate the globe. *Jihad*, or holy war, is often seen as the means to achieve these objectives.

It is commonly asserted that the Islamist movement today comprises a minority of the estimated 1.5 billion Muslims in the world. While estimates vary and numbers are hazy, Islamists could account for as much as 15 percent of the Muslim world.⁸ But even if only 10 percent embrace Islamism, some 150 million people seek a world dominated by a radical interpretation of the faith and harbor a deep hatred for the principles upon which the West was built, including capitalism, egalitarianism, individualism, and democracy.

The fact that radical Islam appears to be proliferating at an alarmingly rapid rate led America to invade Afghanistan in late 2001 for providing safe

haven to the al-Qaeda terrorist network and to increase counterterrorism operations around the world. It has prompted the U.S. Department of State to launch what is now called the “War of Ideas,” a public relations campaign to persuade the Muslim world that liberalism and democracy are on the march. To be sure, the Hamas election victory in 2006 and subsequent takeover of Gaza did little to support that notion.

Unfortunately, the United States and its allies have hard work ahead. The modern Islamist movement has been adding adherents steadily since at least the seventeenth century. The movement’s growth coincided with the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Until the Ottoman decline, the Muslim world had enjoyed the most vibrant culture on earth, with territory encompassing the Middle East and parts of Africa, Asia, and southeastern Europe. Soon, however, the West achieved military superiority and began to hand the Muslim world one defeat after the next. The West also eclipsed the Muslim world in the practical and physical sciences, modern weaponry and military tactics, mass communication, law, and political science.

This startling change to the status quo sparked a range of responses. Although many adapted, some Muslims sought refuge in a totalitarian interpretation of Islam that reminded adherents of an era when the religion was the reigning world force. The ideology rejected the West and its new ways of viewing the world. Rather than simply seeing the West as “the other,” this new breed of Islamic fundamentalist perceived the West as its enemy.

Over time, several seminal thinkers shaped and molded the Islamist view of the world.⁹ Under the sway of these figures, Islamists often rejected the influence of the West and even the legitimacy of their own secular governments for being subservient to the West. The overthrow of these pro-West regimes soon became an integral part of the Islamist agenda.

This negative view of secular governments was undoubtedly the way in which Hamas viewed Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. After all, both the PA and Fatah had long engaged in diplomacy with the United States and even negotiated with Israel for a peaceful settlement to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The very thought of negotiating with Israel, a Jewish state that Hamas sees as usurping Muslim lands, has earned Fatah and the PA the wrath of Hamas. The Islamist group’s covenant of 1988 is a vitriolic, revolutionary document that glorifies violence in the name of Islam. The Hamas covenant declares that “Allah is its target, the Prophet is its model, the Quran

its constitution: Jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes.”¹⁰

Inside the West Bank and Gaza, the only ideology that can compete with Hamas’s Islamist ideology is secular Palestinian nationalism. This ideology is fueled by the legitimate and understandable desire of the Palestinian people to create a state with permanent and recognized borders. Although there is certainly nothing inherently dangerous about a people who seek to inhabit the land they view as their historic homeland, nationalism has been responsible for numerous wars and conflicts around the globe. Combined with xenophobia, chauvinism, and/or irredentism, nationalism can become as dangerous as any other radical ideology.¹¹ In its current incarnation, as commonly expressed by Fatah and the PLO, the ideology of Palestinian nationalism often meets these criteria.

Despite the fact that the Palestinian Authority, a quasi-government staffed primarily by Fatah faction members, is commonly identified as a moderate faction within the Palestinian political spectrum, both Fatah and the PA have sponsored numerous acts of violence over the years. In fact, a persuasive argument can be made that since the very inception of the movement, there has never been a noteworthy nonviolent Palestinian nationalist stream. Dating back to the British mandate (1923–1948), Palestinian nationalism has been based more on destruction (of a Jewish state) than creation (of its own state).

Haj Amin al-Husseini, the *mufti* (religious authority) of Jerusalem from 1921 to 1948, was the first prominent leader of the Palestinian nationalist movement. An ardent anti-Zionist, Husseini whipped up Arab hatred in August 1929 by accusing the Jews of endangering the al-Aqsa Mosque and other Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. In 1936, he led a terrorism campaign against Jewish and British targets, prompting the British to exile him in 1937 (although the Arab revolt he sparked continued through 1939). While in exile during World War II, Husseini established close ties with Nazis, including SS chief Heinrich Himmler, earning the early Palestinian nationalist movement an ignominious place in world history.¹² If Hitler won the war, Husseini reportedly hoped to rule over a vast territory in the Middle East.

French historian Gilles Kepel adds that Husseini helped create the “Handjar (Dagger) SS Battalion that was raised among the Bosnian Muslims” for the Third Reich in the Balkans.¹³

Husseini was not the only leader to soil the name of the Palestinian nationalist movement. Guerrilla leader Yasir Arafat catapulted Palestinian nationalism back onto the world stage in the 1960s and 1970s with spectacular terrorist attacks against Israeli targets, both in Israel and abroad. With perennial facial stubble, olive fatigues, and a *keffiyeh* (the traditional checkered Palestinian headscarf), Arafat was a self-styled revolutionary who directed violence against Israel while also lobbying against it through various diplomatic channels. Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization, an umbrella group for a cornucopia of guerrilla squads, became the preeminent model for terrorism in the modern era. Thanks mostly to PLO violence in the 1970s, the West came to view the entire Palestinian people (not just the violent groups) as bloodthirsty and vengeful, and most commonly identified with headline-grabbing terrorist assaults.

The spate of violence carried out by Palestinians against civilians in the 1960s and 1970s was unprecedented. Beginning in 1968, Palestinian terrorists initiated 35 airplane hijackings.¹⁴ Other acts of terror included the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic games; the 1973 attack on the Saudi embassy in Khartoum, Sudan, that led to the murder of the U.S. embassy’s chief of mission; and the 1985 attack on the cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, in which a wheelchair-bound American Jew was shot dead and dumped into the water.

It can also be argued that violence in the name of Palestinian nationalism has led to death and destruction in nearly every territory that the Palestinians have inhabited in their quest for a nation. In the early 1970s, for example, the Fatah-backed PLO attempted to hijack the kingdom of Jordan. The result was Black September, a bloody war that resulted in thousands of Palestinian casualties and the reemergence of a free Jordan. Fatah and the PLO then attempted to create a mini-state inside Lebanon in late 1970s and early 1980s, which contributed in no small part to an anarchic civil war. Unable to control the violence launched against it from the north, Israel invaded Lebanon and the Palestinians were forced to flee once again, leaving a decimated Lebanon in their wake. Finally, following a decade of exile in Tunisia, the PLO descended on the West Bank and Gaza after the signing of the Oslo Accords be-

tween Israel and the Palestinians in 1993. Since then, the two territories have plummeted into utter disarray, culminating in the 2007 civil war and the violent Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. Thus, with the exception of Tunisia, every home base of the PLO, and subsequently the Palestinian Authority, has been destroyed by the tragic blight of the Palestinian mini-state.

In an attempt to redress the demands of the Palestinians to create a homeland, the international community has floated numerous plans for negotiated settlements over the years. However, the Palestinian leaders have rejected each one. This refusal to compromise, coupled with the adoption of violence as a strategy, has only alienated the Palestinians from the world powers that might have helped them achieve their nationalist aspirations.

In 1947, the United Nations put forth a plan that afforded the Palestinian people half of what is today Israel, with significantly more land than what is now called the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. When the Palestinians rejected this plan, war erupted, leading to a free-for-all Arab land grab. The Egyptians usurped Gaza. The Jordanians occupied the West Bank. The Israelis took everything else in a victorious military campaign. The Palestinians were left with nothing.

A disastrous series of Palestinian choices in 2000 and 2001 demonstrated that, more than a half-century later, obstinacy still trumped the desire for a viable state. Specifically, Yasir Arafat's rejection of the 2001 Taba plan, a last-ditch effort by U.S. president Bill Clinton to save the Oslo peace process, was an unmitigated disaster for the Palestinians. This plan, drafted in the coastal Egypt town of Taba, afforded the Palestinians a state under U.S. guidance, including nearly all lands pursuant to United Nations Resolution 242 (the pre-1967 borders), including small parts of Jerusalem, and permission for a symbolic number of refugees to return to their historic homeland. Seeking to regain lost popularity on the Palestinian street, which put a premium on attacking Israel in both word and deed, Arafat rejected the offer. In so doing, he plunged the Palestinians deeper into a violent uprising and internal upheaval that eventually led to civil war.

While Hamas and Fatah, representing radical Islam and Palestinian nationalism respectively, are at odds, it is interesting to note that their ideologies

are not entirely antithetical. Hamas, for example, does not embrace the secular ideology of nationalism as its guiding principle, but it certainly champions the movement's history of rejecting compromise with Israel and fighting for its historic homeland. The very fact that Hamas embraces Palestinian nationalism is what invited many non-Islamist Palestinians to support its platform when it won the votes of more than 45 percent of the Palestinian electorate in early 2006.

Fatah, for its part, was founded in the late 1950s by a number of practicing Muslims, some with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Over its 50-year history, Fatah has embraced Islamist symbols when convenient. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, for example, which Yasir Arafat founded after the launch of the 2000 intifada (uprising), was the way in which Fatah and its umbrella organization, the PLO, competed with Hamas in the Islamist arena.

Some observers view the fact that both Hamas and Fatah borrow from the other's ideology, when convenient, as common ground between the two warring factions. However, this is likely not the case. Both groups are engaged in a struggle whereby neither is ashamed to adopt the rhetoric or tactics of the other to gain an edge. Both factions know that Palestinian nationalism and Islamism are equally useful tools that can be wielded to generate support from the Palestinian street, depending on the political circumstances.

Thus, although the amorphous ideologies of these two factions are important to understanding the motivation of Hamas and Fatah, they are not the focal point of this book. Rather, this book endeavors to provide a useful history of the Fatah-Hamas struggle. Framing the bulk of discussion between the launch of the first intifada in 1987 and the June 2007 civil war, this book seeks to bring the antagonistic relationship between Hamas and Fatah into sharp relief.

In early 2008, Palestinian negotiators insisted that Israel's intransigence was the primary impediment to Palestinian statehood. Meanwhile, the "other struggle for Palestine" raged. The West Bank and the Gaza Strip were two separate nonstates, ruled by two nongovernments. Violence between Fatah and Hamas continued with no end in sight.

America may yet devise an effective peace plan to finally end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Israel might even make painful concessions at the negotiating table. However, the Palestinians must first reconcile their internal

conflicts and make critical decisions about the use of violence against Palestinians and Israelis alike. In the current political climate, however, this kind of internal review will likely not happen. Real reform will be possible only with the rise of new parties and new leaders who eschew the violent tactics, strategies, and ideologies of the factions that represent most Palestinians today: Hamas and Fatah. In other words, only by rejecting the platforms of both parties will the Palestinian people begin to break the self-destructive cycle described in the pages that follow.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROOTS OF HAMAS AND FATAH

Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) blazed a trail that other Islamist groups have only imitated or built on since. The Brotherhood's ideology has inspired, to one extent or another, many of today's radical movements, including al-Qaeda. Hamas was a splinter faction of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. Fatah had nominal ties with the Palestinian and Egyptian branches of the organization but emulated some of its activities. Indeed, it would be difficult to fully comprehend the intra-Palestinian rivalry, which began in the late 1980s, without first understanding the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded a full seven decades earlier.

Founded by a bearded religious schoolteacher and watch repairman named Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood sought to inculcate and spread fundamentalist Islamic beliefs and values in Egypt and throughout the Muslim world. Born in 1928 of frustration with British (more broadly, Western) influence in Egypt, the movement envisioned the return to a time marked by a global Islamist order (the caliphate) in which Islam reigned supreme through one devout Muslim ruler (the caliph). Al-Banna's fiery orations captured the imagination of many Egyptians growing restless under British rule. He identified the primary ills affecting Muslims as "orientations to apostasy and nihilism" and the "non-Islamic" or "secular" currents

that were growing stronger. Al-Banna was also a talented networker; he made connections throughout Egypt with Muslims who identified with his religious outlook. Inevitably, frustration over a lack of progress on the part of his network of advocates led him to determine that the “time for action” had arrived. Al-Banna and his followers soon developed armed cells that attacked Egyptian officials and supporters of the secularism that had taken control of Egypt. It is believed that in an attempt to quell the movement, elements within the Egyptian government killed al-Banna in Cairo in 1949.¹

Al-Banna’s death did not prevent the rapid spread of the movement he founded. The Brotherhood found further inspiration in Sayyid Qutb, a captivating Egyptian speaker and writer who declared the era in which he lived (the twentieth century) to be one of *jahiliyya* (ignorance and darkness) due to the Muslim world’s lack of adherence to shari’a law. Qutb, a gaunt figure with a mustache and protruding eyes, spent two years studying in Colorado but left unimpressed. His skewering of permissive U.S. culture in his writings captured the imagination of his Brotherhood followers, who were already seeking reasons to hate the West. He also provided Quranic justifications for attacking Muslim leaders whose governments were not in accordance with shari’a. The Egyptian regime executed Qutb in 1966 for his incendiary politics, but his legacy, like al-Banna’s, survived. His most famous book, *Ma’alim fil Tariq* (Milestones), is considered to be on the must-read list of today’s Islamist thinkers and is even said to have influenced Usama bin Laden.²

Soon after Qutb’s death, following the shocking Arab loss to Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War, the Muslim Brotherhood received a surprising boost in support. Moderate Muslims began to look for meaning in these seemingly inexplicable events. The Arab armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria had lost a war to the Jews, a people many Islamists regard as inferior. True, Jews are sometimes referred to as “people of the book” (*Ahl al-Kitaab*) among Muslims, due to a shared belief in one God as well as shared religious heritage rooted in the teachings of the Old Testament. However, Jews have also been treated as second-class citizens within Islam, or “*dhimmis*.” This meant that they were allowed to practice their religion but had to pay a tax to Muslims and recognize the supremacy of Islam. This led to a commonly held belief that Israel was inferior to the Muslim states.³

Moreover, Muslims were in shock over the fact that Israel had conquered Jerusalem, often described as Islam's third holiest city after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. This holy ground, like Israel itself, was considered to be *waqf*, or land endowed to Muslims by Allah. It was therefore unacceptable that it would be under the political and military control of non-Muslims.

Thus, an increasing number of Muslims returned to their Islamic roots and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, which believed that the loss of this land was Allah's punishment for Muslim sinners. The goal, then, was for Palestinian and other Muslims to return to their faith. Only then could they reclaim what they believed to be Palestine, including Jerusalem. This liberation theology remains the immutable cornerstone of the Hamas belief system today.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Muslim Brotherhood expanded rapidly, despite periods of government repression in several countries, to become one of the largest (if not the largest) Islamist organizations in the world. Experts often haggle over the exact membership of the worldwide movement, but the Brotherhood has penetrated every Muslim country, with predictably strong membership in the Arab world but also surprisingly large numbers in the West. The secretive society maintains strong chapters in the United States and western Europe. The movement's Egypt-based chairman, Dr. Mohammed Mahdi Akef (who continues to come under pressure from the Egyptian government) reaches out to his followers through the Brotherhood's English Web site (www.ikhwanweb.net), which charts the news and progress of the organization in Egypt and around the world.

The British mandate of Palestine was one of the first territories to be influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood movement. In fact, the Brotherhood was believed to be the first religious and political movement of its kind in mandatory Palestine. A handful of branches were founded even before the State of Israel was established in 1948.⁴

The Brotherhood first established branches in the West Bank between 1946 and 1948. The movement created more chapters there after the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan conquered the territory in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The

Islamist organization subsequently extended into the Gaza Strip, where Egypt had taken military control. However, in 1948—when the State of Israel was founded, Jordan occupied the West Bank, and Egypt occupied Gaza—the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood was forced to split into two separate organizations for geographic reasons.⁵

The Brotherhood grew steadily but separately in the two disputed territories over the next several decades, albeit under the watchful eyes of the Egyptian and Jordanian *mukhabarat* (security services). Indeed, the Brotherhood's Islamist ideology was not particularly welcomed in either state. The religiosity of Islamism posed a threat to the popularity of Pan-Arabism, a brand of secular socialism championed by Egypt's strongman, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, the Alexandria-born son of a postal worker who came to be seen as the leader of the entire Arab world. Islamism's populist appeal threatened the legitimacy of several traditional Arab monarchies, including those of Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

After Israel's conquest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Six-Day War, it was not Islamism that won the hearts and minds of Arabs. Rather, revolutionary Palestinian nationalism was seen as the panacea for the Arab world's failings. Yasir Arafat, a zealous engineering student turned activist with vague ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, emerged as the unlikely leader of this movement. Arafat had sought to fight alongside the Arab armies in the 1948 war with Israel but was turned away by the invading Arab regimes that sought to maintain control of the battlefield, and ultimately, the land they expected to conquer.⁶ It is believed that this experience served as an awakening for Arafat, who came to believe that the Arab regimes would never defeat Israel. He believed that only a Palestinian revolutionary movement could achieve that goal.

In 1968, Arafat was given control of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a hitherto ineffectual organization created by the Arab League in 1964 that paid only lip service to "liberating" the lands that Palestinians coveted. Arafat soon positioned the PLO, under the leadership of his own Fatah organization, as the only entity that actively sought to conquer Israel.

As previously noted, Fatah was undoubtedly influenced by Islamism. HATAF, which means “death” in Arabic, might have been a natural Arabic acronym for *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Filastiniya* (the Palestinian Liberation Movement). Arafat’s group, however, decided to reverse the order of the letters to give it a quranic meaning; *fatah* means “conquest,” “victory,” or “triumph.”⁷ Thus began the Fatah tradition of wielding Islamist words and symbols when expedient without relinquishing the socialist, revolutionary zeal that motivated the movement’s thinking and actions.

Fatah was founded in 1958 in Kuwait by Arafat, along with seven other Palestinian activists: Khalil Wazir, Salah Khalaf, Khaled al-Hassan, Adil Abdel Karim, Mohammed Yusuf al-Najar, Khalid al-Amira, and Abdel Fatah Lahmoud. Their dream was to one day defeat Israel by force and raise a Palestinian flag over the land that had been conquered in 1948. Fatah was influenced by Islamic ideology but stood for the establishment of a secular state after the destruction of Israel. Over the course of two or three years, Arafat and the others had laid the foundation for a network of secret cells to launch terrorist attacks against Israel. By 1960, Arafat had a small Middle East network and raised enough money to publish a magazine called *Filastinuna: Nida’ al-Hayat (Our Palestine: The Call to Life)* to raise consciousness about the Palestinian plight. The magazine’s circulation was negligible, but it left the impression that there was an active Palestinian underground.⁸

On January 3, 1965, Fatah launched its first military operation when commandos placed a small explosive in the water system in Israel’s Galilee region. A worker for the Israeli Mekorot Water Corporation found the bomb, however, before detonation. When the commandos crossed back over into Jordan, they were arrested by a Jordanian patrol. From a military standpoint, Fatah’s subsequent attacks were also unimpressive. Most of its bombs did not explode, and Israel actually captured one Fatah commando when his rifle misfired. Still, Fatah carried out ten raids against Israel in the first three months of 1965.⁹

Early on, Fatah was based in Syria but launched operations from every state bordering Israel. Syria trained Fatah’s commandos and even broadcast its military communiqués on its state radio but denied responsibility for the attacks, which increased in number and intensity.¹⁰ Between February and May 1965, Fatah carried out several operations from Gaza, prompting Israeli reprisals against the towns of Qalqilya and Jenin inside the West Bank.¹¹

Between May and October 1966, Arafat ordered his Fatah group to execute 15 sabotage operations, 14 of which came from Jordan. Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, an intense man of Ukrainian background, ordered an antiguerrilla offensive. Israel attacked the Jordanian village of Samu in the West Bank on November 13, killing more than 70 people. The devastating offensive only appeared to legitimize Fatah. By the end of 1966, Arafat's terrorist group claimed to have carried out 41 raids into Israeli territories.¹²

In the first half of 1967, the rate of terrorism in Israel doubled. Arafat and his lieutenants ordered 37 attacks against the country in just six months.¹³ The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) also clashed with the Syrian military repeatedly in the Golan Heights, culminating in an air battle over Damascus in which six Syrian MiG fighter planes were shot down, humiliating the Syrian defense minister, Hafiz al-Asad—the man who would wrest control of Syria by coup in 1970 and subsequently maintain authoritarian rule for three decades.

Thanks in part to Fatah, war was on the horizon. Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia made the situation worse by taunting Egypt with claims that it was frightened of a conflict with Israel, choosing instead to hide behind the United Nations (UN) forces that buffered Egypt and Israel. On May 15, 1967, Egyptian President Nasser ordered the UN to withdraw from Sinai and positioned two Egyptian divisions on Israel's southern border. Nasser, who took power by coup in Egypt in 1954, was widely recognized as the leader of the Arab world; he inspired the Arabs with an ideology that synthesized Arab nationalism and socialism. The world looked on anxiously as he blocked Israeli ships from accessing the Red Sea port of Eilat. Fatah made the situation worse by carrying out five sabotage missions against Israeli targets between May 15 and May 26.¹⁴

Seeking to preempt what appeared to be an inevitable war, the Israelis launched a surprise attack on June 5 that decimated the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies. In six days, those three Arab states lost East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. All of the territory that the Arabs had captured in 1948 was now under Israeli control.

Egypt's defeat was devastating. Nasser was seen by many, not just in Egypt, as the only figure who could restore Arab power in the region. After his army's abject failure on the battlefield, many Palestinians ceased trusting

the Arab regimes to “liberate Palestine.” With no one else to turn to, the Palestinians looked to their indigenous freedom fighters for salvation. Fatah had captured the imagination of the Arab world.

“We do not have an ideology,” Arafat stated in 1969. “Our goal is the liberation of our fatherland by any means necessary.”¹⁵ Those means would soon include shocking acts of violence outside of the territory that Arafat sought to conquer.

Among all the Arab actors, Arafat emerged as the only clear winner of the Six-Day War. The self-styled guerrilla, with his trademark checkered headscarf and sunglasses, assumed control of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and quickly thrust it onto the world stage with spectacular acts of terrorism against Israeli targets around the world. In so doing, Arafat became the de facto leader of the Palestinian people and the military commander in the “struggle for Palestine.”

As Arafat, Fatah, and the PLO launched a campaign of terror against Israel, the Palestinian revolutionary movement captured the admiration and respect of the Arab world. By 1974, the PLO was recognized as the unquestioned leader of the Palestinian people at an Arab summit. The summit, held in Rabat, Morocco, and attended by 20 heads of state from around the Arab world, officially recognized Arafat and the PLO as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”

The Rabat conference rattled Israel. The PLO was an unabashedly violent organization that continued to attack Israeli civilian targets worldwide. Thus, Israel sought to find strategies that would undermine the guerrilla movement, particularly among the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By the late 1970s, the Israelis believed they had found Fatah’s Achilles’ heel. Indeed, Fatah had become anxious over the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza. In fact, arguments there between Fatah and the Gaza Brotherhood sometimes turned violent, spilling over into the streets.¹⁶ Israeli officials correctly determined that the Muslim Brotherhood was Fatah’s primary competition. Seeking to undermine the terrorist group, the Israelis made the ill-fated decision to permit the Brotherhood to operate with relatively little oversight.

This flawed and dangerous plan stemmed from the fact that the Brotherhood maintained a rather strict policy of refraining from armed struggle against Israel. Faced with unprecedented guerrilla violence, the Jewish state was relieved to find groups that opposed Israel in word rather than deed. In retrospect, had Israel cracked down on the Brotherhood, there might have been less support for Hamas after its founding in 1988.

The Brotherhood received an unexpected boost after the 1967 war; once Israel took administrative control over both Palestinian territories, the Gaza and West Bank Brotherhood chapters united.¹⁷ Both groups also established ties with the Islamist movement among Arabs inside Israel's Green Line, (the internationally recognized borders following the 1948–1949 war). The biggest boost for the Brotherhood came in 1973, however, when the Israeli military provided Ahmed Yassin, the eventual founder of Hamas, with a license to establish al-Mujamma' al-Islami (the Islamic Center). For the next 15 years, his center served as a political and cultural center for most Brotherhood activities in the Gaza Strip. More important, it provided a vehicle through which Yassin could reach out to all Palestinians. The center boasted an aggressive network of health services, day care, youth activities, and even food services that won the support and loyalty of the destitute Palestinians living in Gaza's refugee camps. These services were part of a long-term strategy of *dawa*, or outreach, to the Palestinian people. They gained Yassin many supporters and laid the foundation for a powerful movement that even he likely could never have foreseen.

Born to a middle-class family in 1938 under the British mandate of Palestine, Yassin came of age as the early failures of Palestinian nationalism became increasingly apparent. When Israel defeated the invading Arab armies in 1948 and 1949, leading to the subsequent creation of the State of Israel, Yassin and his family were relocated to al-Shati refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. After a childhood sports accident left him crippled, he devoted his life to Islamic scholarship and activism. The future Hamas founder studied at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, a breeding ground for the early members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yassin's Brotherhood activism was not popular with Nasser's Pan-Arabist regime. Many of Yassin's cohorts were deported, arrested, or even killed. Egyptian authorities reportedly were more lenient with Yassin due to his health problems. Thus, he was detained for only a short period and then

returned to Gaza, where he found work as a teacher and continued to preach the sanctity of Palestinian land and other Brotherhood precepts. He saw his role as one of a cultural and educational mentor, preparing future generations of Palestinians to wage jihad, or holy war, against Israel.¹⁸ This was the foundation for his center's network, which would in turn become the infrastructure of Hamas by 1988.

There is no denying that the Israeli strategy of allowing Yassin to build his *mujamma'* network in the 1970s and 1980s was shortsighted. The decision makers at the time must not have fully grasped the powerful allure of his message. According to one account, the Israelis arrested Yassin in 1984, but released him in 1985. By the mid-1980s, his network included numerous mosques, charities, and schools that later served as Islamist recruiting grounds for Palestinians throughout the territories. These institutions also became meetings points for Hamas operations, fundraising centers, and even safe houses.

While Yassin built the foundations of Hamas, another violent Islamist organization was born of a fissure that developed among Islamists in the territories. The fissure emerged between the young guard and the old guard of the Muslim Brotherhood. The younger, more zealous Islamists believed that Israel had to be conquered (and become Palestine) before the larger spiritual transformation could take place in every Muslim. The old guard, which represented the longstanding Brotherhood approach, held that nonviolent outreach (*dawa*) was the way to slowly retake Palestine in what they viewed would be a long and protracted battle of wills.

This fissure was the impetus for the founding of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in 1979. PIJ was founded by two Gaza Strip-based Islamists, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Awda and Fathi Shiqaqi, who sought to leverage the momentum of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iranian revolution of that year. Khomeini, the stern and scowling founder of the modern Iranian regime, had inspired Islamists around the world to embrace revolutionary Islam. PIJ was among them. The new Palestinian group advocated immediate confrontation with Israel as part of its commitment to changing the existing world order and replacing it with one dominated by Islam. PIJ's Khomeini-inspired views also

stipulated a complete and total rejection of the existence of the State of Israel, with the ultimate goal of destroying it through jihad.¹⁹ Within a decade, Hamas would embrace these ideas as its own.

PIJ, operating under a variety of names (including the Islamic Vanguard, the Revolutionary Islamic Current, and the Independents Movement), carried out a spate of guerrilla attacks against Israeli targets, particularly military ones in the Gaza Strip. Despite numerous successful Israeli counterterrorism operations against the group, in the 14 months prior to the Palestinian uprising of 1987, PIJ carried out a wave of unparalleled violence. On October 15, 1986, PIJ perpetrated its most famous attack, known as Operation al-Buraq. In this attack, PIJ hurled grenades at the IDF's elite Givati Brigade, which had gathered at Jerusalem's Western Wall (known as *al-Buraq* in the Quran). A string of other PIJ attacks followed, as well as a jailbreak by group members from a Gaza Strip prison in May 1987.

Heading into the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, later that year, many Palestinians viewed PIJ as the most prominent Islamist guerrilla movement in the territories. Indeed, when the Palestinian intifada erupted in December 1987, PIJ was given credit for infusing it with a distinct Islamist character. For this very reason, IDF operations systematically weakened PIJ within several months. The intifada's Islamist overtones had thoroughly alarmed the Israelis, prompting them to deport several PIJ leaders and to assassinate others. Additionally, Israel made sweeping arrests of suspected lower-ranking members throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Successful operations notwithstanding, the intifada had an unmistakably Islamic identity as it gained momentum.

While PIJ was decimated by Israeli arrests and operations, it must be credited with forging a path that encouraged Palestinians to confront Israel in the name of Islam. PIJ's ideological rupture with the Muslim Brotherhood leadership also had lasting implications. Thanks to PIJ, more elements from within the Palestinian's Muslim Brotherhood called for active participation in "resistance" activities against Israel.²⁰

Thus, the stage was set for yet another splinter organization of the Muslim Brotherhood to explode onto the Palestinian political scene. While PIJ influence steadily eroded, Hamas emerged to challenge both the Fatah-backed PLO and Israel. Neither Israel nor the PLO appeared to be prepared.