HAMAS AND THE PALESTINIAN NATIONAL AUTHORITY (PNA) [CHAPTER FOUR]
Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA)

4.1 BACKGROUND AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PNA

Following the signing of the Oslo Accord in September 1993, the process of setting up the Palestinian National Authority was initiated. The first stage outlined in the Declaration of Principles obligated Israel to turn over most of the territories of the Gaza Strip (with the exemption of the Jewish settlements in Katif bloc) and the Jericho area (according to the Cairo Agreement of May 4, 1994) to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The accord affirmed that “authority will be assigned to the Palestinians in the following areas: education and culture, criminal justice, healthcare, social welfare, sanitation, direct taxation and tourism. The Palestinian side will commence in building the Palestinian police force...”

On the following stage, the Interim Agreement (also referred to as Oslo II), effected mostly in late 1995, the PLO gained sole control over all Palestinian cities and the highly populated refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (with the exception of settled Jewish areas in the city of Hebron). The total territory transferred to the sole Palestinian control (Area A) in the two stages was about 3-4 percent of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Both sides also agreed upon was an intermediate division of the rest of the territory of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

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into two areas of governance: an area of about 70 percent of the territory consisting of sole Israeli control – the Jordan valley, all the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and their venues of access (Area C) – and an area of about 27 percent of the land in which there was a joint control – most of the rural areas of the West Bank including about 440 villages and their surrounding lands (Area B). In Area B, the Palestinian Authority was to have control over civil-administrative issues and Israel over military and security issues; joint armed patrols were also arranged for Area B.

These initial stages constituted what the preamble referred to as “the interim self-government arrangements.” Working under the assumption that taking small steps builds trust, the interim arrangements were intended to incrementally transfer the entire Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (with exception of East Jerusalem and the surrounding metropolitan area) to Palestinian governance. The Jewish settlement in the territories (including access to roads) and their population would remain intact under Israeli control for the time being. This agreement was supposed to last five years, during which time a final agreement would be reached determining the status of the Palestinian Authority, the fate of the Jewish settlements, the disposition of East Jerusalem, the possible return or repatriation of the refugees, the division of water in the joint aquifer, and so on. The Israelis also were to ensure free and secure land movement between the two parts of the PA – governed territory (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), release political prisoners, and grant aid (together with the United States and the European countries) for developing an economic and social infrastructure in the areas ruled by the Palestine Authority, including an international airport and a seaport in the Gaza Strip.

Thus, the Palestinian National Authority was created as a result of the Oslo Accord between the Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The accord rendered a Palestinian self-rule over the areas from which Israel withdraws according to the future agreements between both sides. The self-rule should be

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progressively expanded to incorporate all the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, based on United Nations resolutions. The Authority will be comprised of an elected legislative council and a government with 80 percent of its representatives from the legislative council, and with an elected chairman as its head. Israel’s first redeployment out of most of the Gaza Strip and Jericho ended in May 1994, a 10,000 – men – strong Palestinian police force rolled into Gaza and Jericho, paving the way for assumption of control in those areas by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). On July 1, 1994, Arafat moved from Tunis to Gaza, with great fanfare and ceremony, became the head of the Palestinian Authority (PNA). With the signing of the Interim Agreement on 28 September 1995 (about a third of a year beyond the self imposed deadline), the way was open to the Palestinian National Authority’s governing more than 90 percent of the West Bank and Gazan Palestinian population (but less than 5 percent of these territories). About two thirds in Area A were completely under Palestinian National Authority’s jurisdiction, and the one-third was in Area B, where Israel maintained control over security.4

In January 15, 1996, elections were held across most of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in which 88 members of the legislative council were elected and Yasser Arafat was elected as the chairman of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The coalition that opposed Oslo Accord was comprised of popular movements like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), boycotted the elections.5 It was yet the first election in which a large section of the Palestinian people could democratically elect their representatives. Fatah managed to win almost half of the seats in the Legislative Council and dominated, together with some independent sympathizers, most of the bodies of the PNA.6

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The authority as agreed in the Oslo Accord, undertook to protect Israel from Palestinian military resistance, and hence established massive security forces that were mostly employed to oppress the Palestinian movements like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The administrative and security institutions of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) grew disproportionately (for instance, there was a wing of Marine Forces in Nablus that is 30 km away from the nearest coast), and scores of favoritism and corruption were apparent in the Authority that was progressively more concentrated in the hands of its chairman. The Authority was given complete jurisdiction over 17 percent of the West Bank (1,000 square km), termed as Area A, and 55 percent of the Gaza Strip (200 square km), with some 25 percent of the West Bank under partial civil control, termed as Area B. In fact, the PNA’s actual jurisdiction was over (1,200 square km) or 4.4 percent of the area of the Historical Palestine, the majority of which were areas of huge Palestinian population concentration. Moreover, the Authority was not given power over water resources and borders, and did not have safe passage between its dispersed territorial enclaves.\footnote{Ibid.}

### 4.2 Hamas and Palestinian National Authority Relations (1994 – 2000)

At the time, when Oslo Accord was signed on 13 September 1993, fears were expressed for the first time that civil war might breakout in the occupied territories. Particularly Hamas and other opposition groups feared that the strong police force that would have to be established in the autonomous areas would be used against them, since they intended to continue their armed struggle against the Israeli occupation. A statement from ten opposition movements, consisting of eight groups within the PLO – including the PFLP and DFLP, together with Hamas and Islamic Jihad – declared:

> “Arafat and his team of losers see themselves as being involved in creating a strong police force to ensure the security of the Zionist entity, crush the Intifada and crack down on national and Islamic resistance.... this will lead to civil war.”

Hamas’ attitude towards the Palestinian National Authority and Israel was based on the following logic: notwithstanding Oslo I and the subsequent agreements,
Israel is still an occupying power which it is legitimate to combat, and the armed struggle therefore continues. If the Palestinian Authority opposes Hamas on these grounds, Hamas will remain passive in relation to the Authority, but will retaliate against the state of Israel, which was responsible for forcing the Authority to crack down on Hamas. By advocating this logic, Hamas believed that they could safeguard themselves against the worst possible outcome from the Palestinian point of view that is the civil war. The late Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi expressed his view as follows:

“Formerly it was Israel that cracked down on us, now it is the Palestinian Authority. Some believe this will lead to a Palestinian civil war. This will not happen. Despite the Authority’s crackdown on Hamas, we will remain patient. We will continue our struggle against the enemy, the occupying power. We can put it like this – the Authority will continue to crack down on us, and we will continue the struggle against Israel. That is the principle.”

The Hamas’ strategic decision to avoid a civil war scenario at all costs has on the one hand, proved strength, because of the Hamas perception that any internal Palestinian conflict would only serve to promote Israeli interests, but on the other hand has weakened the Hamas’ hand in relation to the Authority. No matter what measures the Authority uses, it knows that Hamas is neither willing nor able to retaliate. The Hamas leaders were also aware about this fact. The editor of the Islamist weekly al-Risala, Ghazi Hamad expressed his view as follows:

“The Authority is convinced that Hamas is sincere in saying that it does not want a civil war – we don’t want to direct our weapons against the Authority. I believe that the Authority is exploiting the fact that Hamas doesn’t want – will never want – to use force against the Authority, and is therefore exercising restraint. They exploit this form of weakness”.

At the same time, though, Hamas persisted its attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians, particularly in the period leading up to the implementation of the

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9 Ibid.,
Cairo Agreement (May 1994) and the implementation of limited autonomy in Gaza and Jericho. Since Hamas viewed the Oslo Accord and Cairo Agreement as existential threats, it was reluctant to leave armed struggle against Israel (and would use it as a form of self-defense against Israel; as a way to avenge the execution of Palestinians; and as a form of pressure on Israel to vacate the West Bank), although the attendant risks were obvious: economic and military punishment by the PNA and Israel, internecine conflict, and deteriorating public support.

Hamas’ strategy of perpetual armed struggle against Israel was bolstered by the massacre of twenty-nine Palestinians by a Jewish settler in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron on February 25, 1994. In response, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades launched a series of revenge, suicide bombings and targeted attacks inside Israel—in Hadera and Afula in April, in October in Tel Aviv, and in Jerusalem and Ramat Gan in the summer of 1995—which resulted in the deaths of many Israeli civilians. Whereas these attacks were reasonable to the Palestinian people as avenging the deaths in Hebron, they were also intended to strengthen Hamas’ bargaining position with the PNA as a major opposition force.10

A severe crackdown began, first by Israel and afterward by the PNA. This resulted in mass arrests of Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists, assassinations of key officials, and escalated closures of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which inflicted tremendous economic hardship on an increasingly impoverished population—a reality that constantly plagued Hamas. Hamas and the Islamic Jihad altogether blamed the PNA for cooperating with Israel against their movements and in assassinating vital members of their military wings. On 18 November 1994, a horrible incident occurred in the Gaza Strip, which, according to some Hamas officials changed the internal Hamas—PNA relation forever. Popularly known as the Black Friday, the PNA security forces opened fire on Islamic activists (mostly Hamas) and gunned down twelve in a demonstration outside at Gaza’s Filastin Mosque. The protest transformed

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into a riot, as a result fifteen people were killed, two hundred were wounded, and hundreds more arrested.\(^{11}\)

The increased fear over rising internecine violence and Israel’s harmful economic closures as well as popular expectations surrounding the Oslo II agreement, known as the Tab A Accords, compelled both Arafat and Hamas to try to resolve their differences (over the employment of violence against Israel) in talks that occurred in Cairo during late 1995. After the signing of the Tab A Accords on September 28, 1995, (which disintegrated and cantonized the West Bank), Hamas’ inside leadership temporarily suspended suicide strikes against Israel since they did not want Hamas to be viewed as having disrupted Israel’s planned withdrawal from major Palestinian localities. An understanding reached between Hamas and PNA, according to which Hamas was to avoid embarrassing the PNA by refraining from attacks against Israel from areas under the PNA’s control. In fact, the period between August 1995 and February 1996, Hamas and Islamic Jihad didn’t inflict any suicide attacks against Israel, due to the heavy pressure exerted on the both organizations by Israel and PNA.\(^ {12}\)

Hamas leaders in the area controlled by the PNA sought an agreement through the PNA on a mutual cessation of hostilities. Hamas would sign a formal agreement with PNA, and not with Israel, and in return, Israel would avoid pursuing movement’s activities and release Sheikh Yassin from prison. Chairman Yasser Arafat and Prime Minister Shimon Peres had been part of the effort to reach such an agreement. While internal Hamas activists were in favor of an agreement with the PNA for a total cessation of suicide attacks against Israel, the “outside” Hamas leaders refused to accept such an agreement. But together they agreed to halt military operations against


Israel from PNA controlled territories and refrain from publicly announcing or taking responsibility of such an attack, in order to avoid embarrassing the PNA.\footnote{Ibid.}

The first general elections within the territories of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) were scheduled on January 15, 1996. The President of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the members of the Palestinian Assembly (PA) were to be elected. Hamas had to respond to the Democratic debate in the post–Oslo era and its position towards general elections. This issue had been a matter of debate within the movement in the late 1993 and early 1994. Most Hamas leaders opposed the elections because of their view that any participation would implicitly recognize the Oslo Accords. However, there was an internal battle between pragmatists and radicals within the movement regarding the movement’s position on the elections. Musa Abu Marzuq from the political department declared earlier that Hamas would not participate in any elections which are the result of the Oslo Accords and that it would boycott all political and administrative institutions created as a consequence of this Agreement.\footnote{Nusse, Andrea, \textit{Muslim Palestine: The Ideology of Hamas}, (Abingdon: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 122-23.} According to him, the text of the accords subjected the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to the Zionist occupation. Thus the proposed elections were not established on Palestinian legislation, but took place in the order of the ‘Zionist occupiers’. Hamas wanted to avoid any cooperation with the occupying power, but would still participate in the political process through its presence in security and the participation in elections for unions, professional bodies and other popular organizations.

At the same time, Hamas officially denounced, in a statement issued in Amman, any participation in the formation of the Palestinian National Authority. Hamas, further showed his concern that the Accords did not include any representation of the Palestinians living outside the territories under the control of the PNA. The Palestinians living in exile or within the boundaries from 1948 will not be represented. Thus Israel would succeed in dividing the Palestinians from within the territories. In January 1996 \textit{Filistin al-Muslima} emphasized that Hamas did not reject elections in general, but only boycotted the “Oslo Elections” that were not
representative legislative elections, but an act to endorse the Oslo Accords and the occupations. The elections were called a ‘carnival’ because they were based on devotion to the false and the neglect of the truth.

Hamas’ armed wing Izz al-Din al-Qassam carried out a new series of suicide attacks on Israel in 1996. The suicide attacks represented a response to the Mossad’s assassination of Yahya Ayash, famously known as “the Engineer”. Ayash was at the top of Israel’s list of wanted men and was said to have been responsible for several suicide attacks in various Israeli cities in 1994 and 1995. Under an agreement previously contracted by Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), Hamas waited to deliver its response until after the Palestinian elections, which was held in January 1996. But on 25 February 1996, the second anniversary of the Hebron massacre, Hamas launched a series of four suicide attacks over a period less than two weeks. After that disagreement within Hamas surfaced again. While several founding members of the movement appealed to the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades to stop the attacks, the Hamas headquarters, which was located in Amman declared that no decision had been taken to stop or suspend attacks directed against Israel. As a result of these actions, both Israel and PNA started to crackdown on the Hamas members and its sympathizers in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. More than 1,200 members were arrested, a number of Islamist social institutions were ransacked and subsequently closed down, and more importantly, the charitable organizations and Mosques that had been previously controlled by Hamas were put under the control of the Palestinian Minister of Religious Affairs.

Arafat outlawed six Palestinian militia, including Hamas’ Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Under strong international and Israeli pressure, he stated that he

15 Ibid., See also, Filistin al-Muslima, January 1996, p. 7.
16 Ibid.,
would fully cooperate with Israel to wipe out terrorism.\textsuperscript{18} An international summit was held in the Egyptian town of Sharm el-Sheikh on 13 March on the initiative of the United States President Bill Clinton uniting 27 nations among whom 13 Arab States together condemned terrorism and called for the continuation of the Peace Process.\textsuperscript{19} Arafat was described as the big loser in his campaign against Hamas because it did not only increase the popular support of the Islamic Resistance Movement, but it also revealed the truth of the “Oslo Accords”.

The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was a mere hostage to the demands of the occupying power and especially its security interests. Arafat was a prisoner of his entente with the occupying power that was controlling him. This prevented any independent relation between the Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority no matter how Hamas behaved. But Arafat was not only collaborating with Israel, but even with the United States. It was revealed that the U.S. administration sent the vice-president of the CIA to the region to coordinate the efforts to fight terrorism and the exchange of information between the Palestinian police and the Israeli secret service. The Sharm el-Sheikh summit was described by \textit{Filastin al-Muslima} as a mobilization of the entire world in war against Hamas and was said to have led to a legislation ‘collectively punishing the Palestinians’.\textsuperscript{20} A group photo of the participating heads of state holding hands was published and commented as showing the ‘world standing shoulder to shoulder in their fight against Hamas’.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Filastin al-Muslima} tried to delegitimize Arafat and his government in political terms, using the powerful argument that he was defending Israel's interests and not those of his own people. The reaction to the bombings was a unique occasion which highlighted the ambiguous position of the PNA as a buffer between Israeli security interests and the Palestinians, especially since Arafat himself stated that he

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Middle East International}, 15 March 1996, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Filastin al-Muslima}, April 1996, p. 20.
would ‘collaborate’ with Israel in order to prevent attacks. It was the worst thing to be viewed as an agent of the occupying power particularly in the Palestinian context. Sharm el-Sheikh Summit was perceived as a “conspiracy” of the entire world against Hamas and the Palestinian people. While Arafat was shaking hands with the heads of state that never defended the Palestinian cause, his police closed down social institutions run by Hamas and serving the Palestinian people.²² It can also be noticed that the language of Hamas was not violent, but rational and that there was no use of Islamic symbols or justifications for the condemnation. Hamas was playing its role as an opposition force using the suicide attacks to highlight and exploit the difficult situation and putting pressure on its political enemy Yasser Arafat.

Another event which brought bitterness between Hamas and the PNA relation was the death of political prisoner Mahmud Jumay on 29 July due to the torture in the Palestinian prison. On 1 August in Nablus, thousands of people attended his funeral where youths stoned the municipality buildings. Next day on 2 August, hundreds of Palestinians gathered outside the Tulkram prison protesting against the detention of the several Palestinians without trial. Mysteriously, the police opened fire, leaving one Palestinian dead and seven wounded. Both protests were organized by Hamas, even though that in Nablus was led by the Fatah members.²³

In a memorandum, Hamas called the Palestinian Authority the “Oslo Power” and lamented the ‘acts of piracy of power’.²⁴ Hamas vehemently condemned Arafat for his human rights violations. The oppressive politics of Palestinian National Authority were exemplified as, for instance, silencing the citizens and arresting journalists and human rights activists and also the appalling torture of more than 100 prisoners. Hamas warned the danger of a further fractioning of Palestinian society and stated that it had remained silent for so long in order to maintain unity. But with the two street demonstrations, the Palestinian people pushed the matter almost to an uprising. Now Hamas could no longer remain silent in front of torture and oppression and considers it as its duty to stir up the public in order to stop these practices and to

²² Hamas explains that it leads a specific Jihad that weakened the strength and capacity of Palestinian National Authority. In: Memorandum of Hamas on refusal of the self-rule, 1995, p. 34.
prevent Palestinian society from sliding into the hell of internal clash or a life in the shadow of dictatorship. It appealed to the Palestinian public to fight for the respect of the human rights, freedom and glory of the Palestinian people.

In other words, it can be said that it appealed the Palestinians to make efforts to stop financial support of the PNA as the money would ultimately be used for their own oppression. The pictures of two killed Palestinians as well as a tortured body were shown on the back cover of Filistin al-Muslima. The text simply said: the murderer was not the occupying power. It was stated that the situation in the Palestinian prisons are not different from the one in Israeli prisons. An Amnesty International report was used as a source of this statement. Filistin al-Muslima took stock of two years of the Palestinian National Authority in office: at least more than 1,000 Palestinians were in prison and nine dead due to the torture because of their opposition to the Oslo Accords and to the government.²⁵ The continued violations of human rights and restrictions of the freedom by the PNA were condemned. The main work of the various security services established by Yasser Arafat was the protection of the occupation. Hamas continuously criticized the compromising attitude of Arafat and his government towards the Israel.

Arafat desired to stay away from further internecine conflict with Hamas and accordingly focused more on renovating their strained relationship. Whereas suicide operations were halted for almost a year, they restarted in March 1997 with an attack in Tel Aviv coffee shop followed by two other suicide operations in August and September in Jerusalem, leading to further and harsher crackdown on Hamas. The announcement by Hamas’ headquarters in Amman was apologetic, trying to justify the return to the armed struggle and suicide operations as the only way to block the Israeli settlement efforts and the “Judization” of the holy Islamic places in Jerusalem. The PNA reacted by taking punitive measures against the Hamas. A number of Hamas’ political leaders were arrested and some of the movement’s charitable organizations were closed down. The PNA’s harsh response was answer to the

Hamas’ violation of the 1995 understanding that prevented it from carrying suicide or military operations against Israel from PNA’s controlled areas.26

Reeling from blows directed both from Israel and the PNA, Hamas found respite from an unexpected twist of events. In October 1997, the Mossad tried a failed assassination attempt in Jordan against Khaled Mishal, the head of Hamas’ “outside” political bureau. To stave off the embarrassment of having infringed on the sovereignty of Jordan, with which Israel concluded peace only three years before, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released Yassin, imprisoned in Israel since 1989, expelled him to Jordan, and subsequently allowed him to return to the Gaza Strip in October 1997.27 Ten years of imprisonment and multiple physical handicaps had not dimmed Sheikh Yassin ability to seize the moment and act as the public face of the movement. Immediately after his release, he met with the Amman – based leadership returning to the Gaza Strip five days later. Sheikh Yassin had already clarified Hamas’ priorities and directions. At his home in the Sabra Quarter of Gaza City, he emphasized the need for improving relations with the PNA, noting that “we are one nation. We are fighting for the same goal, and we have one enemy, so we have no choice but to unite”28.

Two years later, it was Jordan’s turn to expel the “outside” Hamas Political Bureau. Khaled Mishal first visited Iran and then moved to Damascus. This symbolized Hamas’ clearly growing orientation toward the Iran – Syria axis, which would henceforth supply it with much of its financing along with some of its training and arms. However, Hamas’ stature at the end of the 1990s was little different from what it had been in the beginning of the decade. Palestinian polling institutes consistently reported that only one-fifth of the respondents in the territories called Hamas the movement they most identified with. Failure to participate in the elections

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and function as a legitimate opposition was often cited as one of the major reasons for its relative failure to forge ahead in Palestinian public opinion.  

Economic reasons also played a role in keeping support for Hamas relatively stagnant. Hamas’ use of violence imposed a heavy toll not only on Israel, but also for Palestinians. An increase in military operations meant greater restrictions on access to the coveted Israeli labor market, particularly for residents of the Gaza Strip. The economic dividends of such access involving 100,000 workers in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip easily outweighed the welfare benefits they derived from the social services Hamas provided them. These salaries accounted for one-fifth of the gross domestic product, and through their multiplier effects, perhaps doubled that. Yet, Hamas was stymied most by the sheer political, military, and economic resources at the disposal of the PNA. If after the Gulf War the PLO and Fatah were strapped for cash and Hamas became the major beneficiary, the Oslo peace process and, to a lesser extent, the slump in the Gulf States oil revenues turned the tide in the PLO’s favor. This was the period in which Arafat enjoyed more direct access to the president of the United States than most leaders of states. The PNA enjoyed a budget of over $1 billion, at least five times larger than the maximum estimated budget of Hamas. In addition, the PNA employed nearly 150,000 workers, of which over one-third were security personnel. Militarily, Hamas was no match for the PNA’s dozen or so security forces, especially after Arafat reactivated the Fatah Tanzim, the grassroots militia, in 1996, both as a counterbalance to his own security forces and to deter Hamas at the popular level.

Hamas obviously realized where the power lay. Despite massive detentions, particularly in 1996 – 1997, and more occasional PNA security cooperation with Israel against the organization, the Hamas refrained from retaliating against the PLO. It almost always confined its opposition throughout this period to protest demonstrations.

By early 1998, hostilities between the PNA and Hamas had increased dramatically, especially after the assassination of three senior military commanders of

30 Ibid.,
the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Hamas proclaimed that Israel was responsible for the murders as well as it also blamed the PNA for cooperating with Israel in their execution. This collaboration was undoubtedly encouraged by what the Palestinian leadership expected would be successful conclusion to the upcoming Wye River Memorandum, signed in Washington on 23 October 1998, which called for redeployment of Israeli forces in the West Bank. The Wye River Memorandum which was signed between Israel and PNA, not only made Israel’s transfer of land to the PNA conditional on the latter’s commitment to fight terrorism and all forms of violence and to collect arms, but the PNA also officially agreed to the United States monitoring of their implementation, thus allowing the direct involvement and presence of American inspectors in Palestine.31

Six days after the Wye Accords was signed, a member of Izz al-Din al-Qassam attempted a suicide attack of a school bus carrying Jewish children in the Gaza Strip. The attack resulted in failure at the last minute by the military escort and ended with the death of the Palestinian driver and an Israeli soldier. The children remained unharmed. This incident was followed by an explosion of a car bomb a week later, in which two Palestinian from the Islamic Jihad were killed in downtown Jerusalem. The indication was clear that both Hamas and Islamic Jihad still possessed organizational and planning capability and had access to material and human resources. This situation resulted in another wave of repressive measures by PNA, which placed even Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin under house arrest for two months. Hamas military wing Izz al-Din al-Qassam threatened through a massage that further arrests and repressive measures against Hamas might lead to a confrontation with the PNA’s security apparatus, despite the prohibition by the movement’s leadership.32 Sheikh Bitawi, a senior Islamist figure whose acceptance of the post of the deputy grand judge had signaled closer Hamas coordination with the PNA, was arrested for declaring the Wye River Agreement as “an act of treason”. Till January,


some 1,100 Palestinians (mostly Islamists) were under PNA detention, most of them without charge or trial.³³

4.3 HAMAS AND PALETINIAN AUTHORITY RELATION (2000 – 2005)

The Al-Aqsa Intifada began in 2000 after then Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount on which the Al-Aqsa Mosque can be found. This visit, widely perceived as a provocation by Palestinians, sparked the uprising against Israel and eventually gave it its name. It was initially spearheaded by the so-called Tanzim (“Organization”) and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, both militant organizations affiliated with Fatah.³⁴ Hamas, in the meantime, kept a rather low profile at first.³⁵ The initial decision of Hamas to keep quiet was probably the result of carefulness not to get involved in the uprising too quickly out of fear of both Israel and the PNA. As the uprising and Israel’s military actions progressed, however, so did a Hamas’ willingness to strike, making its use of suicide attacks more popular. This together with the decline of Tanzim caused by Israeli detentions, the diminishing ability of the PNA to curb Hamas’ actions as a result of Israel’s incursions into the West Bank and the lack of unity within Fatah, provided Hamas the opportunity it was in search of. The Al-Aqsa Intifada thus became increasingly dominated by Hamas, aided by the social, educational, and religious facilities it had “inherited” from the Muslim Brotherhood, from which the organization had its origin.³⁶

The Al-Aqsa Intifada was a response to Israel’s intensified occupation and the losses inflicted by the Oslo Accords (particularly the fragmentations and

cantonization of Palestinian lands in the West Bank; the economic and demographic separation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; and the isolation of the Gaza Strip) – the Palestinian political environment changed radically. Prior existing political arrangements were fractured, the economic conditions continued to deteriorate, and basic social compositions and mediatory institutions were weakened. Within this milieu, the Islamist antagonism, markedly Hamas, reasserted itself. The Intifada was mainly directed against Israel, but it was also a rebellion against the Fatah – dominated PNA and its inability to set up viable state institutions or engage in a process of national reformation and healthy democratic practice. It is crucial to comprehend that the occupation did not alleviate during the ambiguous peace process, but was bolstered (with the backing of a dependent Palestinian regime and the international donor community). Thus the political reality brought by the Oslo Accords of an autonomous, practical PNA government and the president was misleading. The Oslo reality was not one of an independent state or institutions, but of an increasingly confined, weakened, and reliant administration under military occupation.

As a result, this was an arrangement by which Israel preserved its complete control over the Palestinian people and their resources but handed over all responsibility for them. The PNA was given full accountability for day-to-day life (and for inflicting some of the more oppressive aspects of the occupation) but with limited autonomy and authority to administer it workably. This is why, in part, Yasser Arafat conceded to and utilized the militarization of the Intifada, which fueled the violence and the consequent deterioration of the Palestinian economy and society. The economic and political vacuum created by the peace process – filled during the Oslo years by increasing restrictions, growing corruption, and rising bureaucratization – was substituted by bloodshed, political paralysis, and internal chaos.

During this period, no player, together with the PNA, promoted a political program, guiding its actions or a political maneuver for moving forward. Political factions were mobilized around more or less an explicitly negative agenda rather than around a positive program of renovation and rehabilitation. Consequently, Palestinian resistance and political scenario were characterized by armed groups, not civic institutions. The militarization of the Palestinian society and the destructive political
divisions contributed to violent rupture within Fatah and to varying levels of violence between Hamas and Fatah.\textsuperscript{37}

Together with Israel’s destruction of much of the PNA’s infrastructure, especially its security apparatus, and financial strangulation during this period, internal political split contributed to greater anarchy, chaos, lawlessness and insecurity. One dangerous outcome was the rapid growth of challenging sources of power, such as militias (military and security), clans, and criminal activities. Militias and clans, which occasionally overlapped, also resonated powerfully in a society where tribal feelings and necessities for group affiliations were deeply felt at the cultural level and alienation and humiliation were the prevalent experience at the political level.\textsuperscript{38}

Due to this, the situation was characterized by several dangerous features: the absence of a viable governing institution in Palestine capable or willing to preserve or defend its people or involve in meaningful public service or leadership in any form; the lack of due process and any valid system of accountability, appeal, or justice; and the absence of economic advancement.\textsuperscript{39} The Palestinian political arrangement witnessed deep fracture when international community forced Arafat in April 2003 to establish a prime ministerial post. This further enhanced Fatah’s internal power struggles and greatly undermined Arafat.\textsuperscript{40}

By 2004 the PNA’s control over the Gaza Strip was undermined considerably, and Yasser Arafat faced possibly his utmost challenge of the previous decade. Hamas, benefited a lot by Fatah’s internal conflict, refrained from this intra – Fatah fighting and concentrated instead on targeting Israel and on growing popular demands for public accountability and democratic restructuring.


\textsuperscript{39} International Crisis Group (ICG), \textit{Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration} (Amman/Brussels: ICG, January 18, 2006), p. 12, No. 82.

Therefore a key ingredient in Hamas’ electoral victory in the municipal and legislative levels was due to the fact that the Fatah showed little responsibility toward its constituency, pursuing its own unethical interests, even at the price of growing anarchy and turmoil, which symbolized a turnaround from the past.41

The support for Hamas dramatically increased during the first years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The de-radicalization of Hamas during the Oslo period ended with the militarization of the Intifada. Palestine’s changed political environment obviously benefited Hamas, which has been termed by late Israeli scholar Baruch Kimmerling as the politicide of the Palestinians, particularly from Fatah’s internecine struggles.42 As Arafat’s power impaired, Hamas and other militant factions started targeting Israeli cities with suicide bombing attacks against the official PNA policy. The PNA was made responsible for these suicide operations, and Israel responded with devastating results. As the PNA weakened, Hamas’ willingness to weaken it further enhanced where most of the Hamas leadership believed – (despite Israel’s killing of several of its senior and key military officials during 2003) – that Hamas could efficiently fill any vacuum created by the devastation of the PNA or possibly replace it altogether, a conviction that became a fact less than three years later. Politically, Hamas turned into an influential actor, its popularity improved not only by its militant actions against Israel, but also by Israel’s unappeasable assassinations of its leaders.43 This led the Fatah leadership in initiating negotiations with Hamas in August 2002 over its entry into PLO and into mainstream Palestinian politics.44

In September 2002, before Israel’s military blockade of Arafat’s compound later that month, the United States had indirect dealings with senior Hamas leaders and had seemingly assured them that in return for their conformity to become part of a secular and democratic unity government in a new Palestinian state (a dialogue that


Hamas was already handling with Fatah, and which undoubtedly contributed to the six-week suspension in suicide bombings in 2002), the United States would pressurize Israeli government to end their policy of targeted killings and capturing of Hamas key officials. The United States diplomat engaged in the “negotiations” indicated that while he could not assure Israeli acceptance, the United States appreciated Hamas’ choice to become “a legitimate portion of the political process.” It was also obvious that the United States authorized Hamas – Fatah talks. As reported, Hamas officials were amused by these signals that the United States would greet Hamas’ political participation.\footnote{Mark Perry, “Israeli Offensive Disrupts US – Hamas Contacts,” \textit{Palestine Report}, October 9, 2002.}

A senior U.S. envoy expressed his view in this way: “\textit{There is a difference between Hamas and, say, the Iranian mullahs. The one tradition is nationalist and revolutionary; the other is clerical and religious. We know the difference. We know who the honest actors are. We don’t happen to like Hamas tactics, but we know there’s a world of difference between what they want and what say.}”\footnote{Ibid.}

Interactions between the United States and Hamas (of which Israel was fully alert) terminated when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) detained a moderate Hamas official in Ramallah on 9 September 2002, which Hamas perceived as an intentional action by the Sharon government to sabotage its exchange with the U.S. This event was followed by another just a few days later by an Israeli assault in Rafah, which slaughtered nine Palestinians. On September 19, two Hamas’ suicide operations took place as expected in Tel Aviv.\footnote{Alex Fishman, “A Dangerous Liquidation,” \textit{Yediot Achronot}, November 25, 2001.} This was accompanied by Israel’s military blockade of the presidential compound in Ramallah. U.S. pressurized Sharon, which brought an end to the siege soon thereafter. In September 2002, Hamas and Israel agreed upon a negotiation over a ceasefire,\footnote{Beverly Milton-Edwards and Alastair Crooke, “Waving, Not Drowning: Strategic Dimensions of Ceasefires and Islamic Movements,” \textit{Security Dialogue} 35 (September 2004), pp. 302-303.} even though Israel’s unsuccessful assassination attempt against Abdel Aziz Rantisi in June 2003 almost brought an end to these negotiations. An authorized ceasefire or \textit{hudna} was announced on 29 June 2003, but the Sharon administration did not respected it and resumed its assassination campaign. Consequently, this led to the killing of two Hamas officials, Hamish Abu-Salam and
Faiz al-Sadar on 9 August 2003, in the Askar refugee camp near Nablus. Hamas’ avenged these killings with the two suicide bombings at Rosh Ha’ayin and Ariel breaking the June ceasefire or *hudna*.

As stated by Gideon Levy of Ha’aretz, “Much as Israel claims that the Palestinians are violating the truce and regrouping in order to perpetrate savage acts of terror, its pleading cannot alter the facts: up until Israel renewed its assassinations campaign, there were no suicide bombings, and the two attacks (at Ariel and Rosh Ha’ayin) last week were direct responses to the Askar refugee camp slayings.”

More attacks followed by Hamas comprising the killing of twenty-two Israelis in Jerusalem on 19 August 2003. Ismail Abu Shanab was assassinated two days later on 21 August, after which Hamas declared the termination of the ceasefire, informing Israel that it could expect “rivers of blood” in its cities. On 6 September 2003, the European Union under heavy American and British pressure approved a resolution blacklisting the political wing of Hamas and designating it as a terrorist organization. The Israeli government instantly reacted with an attempted assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in the Gaza Strip, the spiritual leader and founder of Hamas (who was soon after assassinated on 22 March 2004).

The Israeli government’s policies towards Hamas were obviously aimed to weaken any prospect of a political settlement, because Israeli government was unwilling to make any concession and preferred instead a decisive military victory that could serve Israeli long term interests no matter whatever it costs. Thus it intended to not pull Hamas into a political role that would enable “the Islamists with an increased share of power in return for their conformity to a transformed political approach” and thereby foster an internal political resolution among Palestinian factions. The Sharon government strongly contested this because it would have

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strengthened the Palestinian position. The Israeli government tried to destroy the Islamists through military means and to encourage continued internal political conflict.

Therefore, Hamas proposed in January 2004 a ten year ceasefire or *hudna* in exchange for Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and Jerusalem without committing any political compromise or recognition. The concept of *hudna*, understood as a temporary truce between Hamas and Israel. Hamas accepted the imbalance of power between Palestinians and Israelis stating that it is willing to compromise its ultimate goal of “liberating all the historic land of Palestine” temporarily suspend the armed struggle against Israel if latter withdraws its soldiers and settlers from the occupied territories, permit all Palestinian refugees to return, and release of all Palestinian prisoners. Such a truce will enable Hamas to come back again in future to struggle for “all of Palestine”. Hamas justified such a *hudna* since even the Prophet Muhammad himself is said to have favored this type of truce with his enemies in Mecca.\(^{53}\) The proposal of a truce clearly represented an effort by Hamas to make stronger and procure its leadership position, possibly in harmonization with some younger, rising Fatah leaders – markedly Marwan Barghouti, who had came in contacts with the Islamists before in the August 2002 negotiations.\(^{54}\)

Hamas’ political shift was the result of Israel’s success at further weakening its military capability (as it did throughout the Oslo period) through its targeted assassination campaign and regular raids into Palestinian cities and localities. During 2002 and 2004, Hamas had lost almost all its prominent leaders in Gaza as well as its founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.\(^{55}\) Actually, Ahmad Yassin’s and al-Rantisi’s assassinations in 2004 – undoubtedly effected Hamas’ military capacity to continue its suicide operations, and some Hamas officials began to question their efficacy.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{53}\) Wagemakers, Joas, Legitimizing Pragmatism: Hamas’ Framing Efforts from Militancy to Moderation and Back?, *Terrorism and Political violence*, 22:3, p. 359. To link this Article: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546551003765942](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546551003765942)


\(^{56}\) Beverly Milton-Edwards and Alastair Crooke, “Waving, Not Drowning: Strategic Dimensions of Ceasefires and Islamic Movements,” *Security Dialogue* 35 (September 2004), pp. 303–304. See also,
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were successful in thwarting further suicide bombings. The figure of Israeli civilians killed by Palestinians (in Israel) had significantly decreased from 184 in 2002 to 104 in 2003 to 53 in 2004 and 24 in 2005. Till the 11 July 2004, bombing in Tel Aviv, the Israeli forces were able to block all attempt of an attack inside Israel and chiefly inside the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This was assumed by some observers as the systematic decline of Hamas’ combat potentialities and that of Palestinian militants more generally. Israel’s campaign of political assassinations as perceived aimed to disrupt internal dialogues over power sharing and endeavors at cooperation. These assassinations also intended, to undermine Palestinian radicalism in a way that would rationalize Israel’s perpetual occupation. Israel continuously emphasized that Palestinians can only be dealt with militant actions and not as people with national rights or as legitimate political actors.

In April 2004, Sharon’s announcement of his willingness to disengage from the Gaza further advanced a more realistic response by Hamas; Arafat’s death in November 2004 was also the critical defining moment. Arafat’s death exposed the degree of the structural setbacks of the Palestinian political system. As the system witnessed growing fragmentation due to the Arafat’s death, but particularly after Oslo Accords, Arafat had remained the primary source of its legitimacy and defensibility. His death, hence, brought a crisis of legitimacy and representation. His successors, Mahmoud Abbas especially, had to put effort to re-legitimize and restoring the Palestinian political system not only nationally but also regionally and internationally. Domestically, Mahmoud Abbas tried to manage it through a series of elections: presidential election in January 2005, which he became a victor; municipal elections between December 2004 and December 2005; and legislative elections in January 2006. This endeavor of re-legitimization could not succeed without Hamas’ participation, nor could it afford Hamas’ persisted opposition. Regionally and internationally, Abbas wanted to resume the U.S. Roadmap initiative by means of renovating the 2003 Palestinian ceasefire – offering Hamas a form of power sharing in return for the termination of violence – but his reliance on American and Israeli optimistic engagement and his incapacity to confront Israeli unilateralism guaranteed failure. Willing to become part of the political mainstream and of the governmental

structure of the Gaza on the occasion of Israel’s disengagement was very significant to the Hamas. Obviously, Hamas was no longer intended to play the role of rejectionist opposition, realizing the inefficiency of armed struggle without political involvement. Hamas growing popularity was bound to believe itself part of the political truth and was in search of long-term political participation and ways of integration, seeking to transform popular support into institutional power. Hamas strategy was one of gradual political integration, which would enable Hamas to achieve greater legitimacy not only domestically but also internationally by differentiating itself from the Taliban and al-Qaeda.57

Hamas advocated that it had no desires to take over Palestinian politics – seizing power would be harmful to its credibility – and would continue to refrain from the internecine hostility with Fatah, although fighting with Fatah continued, which brought specifically a grave situation in July 2005.58 Nevertheless, Hamas restated its call for power sharing in which it had a vital role to play and also declared that Fatah would not govern alone in the Gaza Strip. The strategy followed by Hamas has been termed by the political analyst Mouin Rabbani as a “Hezbollah model: legitimacy through resistance and recognition and protection through political participation”.59 Hamas’ integration into the PLO was discussed in the Cairo meeting of 17 March 2005. Hamas proposition to let the formation of a committee for the reformation of the PLO was accepted by the Fatah and persuaded Mahmud Abbas not to disarm Hamas until the legislative elections.

Consequently, Hamas accepted a ceasefire with Israel until December 2005 (which continued to be in effect until June 2006, when Hamas withdrew it) and agreed to ensure that Israel’s disengagement from Gaza would not occur under Hamas gunfire. With Hamas continued emphasis on the matter of power sharing, especially over the inventory of state lands by spring 2005,60 tensions emerged between Hamas

60 Ibid.,
and Fatah over the failure to respect their agreements in spite of the imminence of Israel’s disengagement. The promised Israeli disengagement from Gaza initiated considerable domestic activity, together with an eighteen-point program for Gaza known as the Barghouti document designed to facilitate the changeover of power in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israel’s withdrawal. This document was written by the imprisoned leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Marwan Barghouti, who was in touch with Hamas leaders since long period. The plan sought a role for the Islamists, in association with the PNA, in administering Gaza. Even though the PNA was to be the major governing authority, all other factions were to have real participation into the administration of Gaza by means of their membership in a monitoring committee. In return, Hamas had to prevent its all attacks on Israel instigated from the Gaza Strip (but not from the West Bank). At that time, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad agreed in principle although not officially.

Reportedly, Hamas leadership has secretly circulated a confidential document, after the assassination of Ahmed Yassin and al-Rantisi, drafted by al-Zahar and Ismail Haniyeh and titled “Document on the Approach to the Anticipated Withdrawal from the Gaza Strip,” among its leadership in the Gaza. The document circulated on 24 May 2004, revealed Hamas’ recognition that political participation was inevitable. Actually, the document discussed the formation of “a united legitimate leadership” in the Gaza Strip consisting of “all the nationalistic and Islamic factions,” which would participate in decision making. A significant point regarded the circumstances under which Hamas would work with the PNA in spite of their ongoing conflict. The Hamas leadership made this endeavor provisional on the nature of the Israeli disengagement: “whether it will be complete or limited, unilateral or under agreement with the Palestinian Authority.” Additionally, Hamas would have nothing to do with an arrangement between Israel and the PNA that incorporated attacks against it. If so threatened, Hamas would “demonstrate a street presence in an active and powerful manner” and would “strive to form necessary alliances in a way that will guarantee . . . that the PNA makes no decisions separately.” The document incorporated instructions to rank-and-file members to take certain roles even if Hamas’ official posture is against the withdrawal agreement: “In case an agreement is achieved on

withdrawal between the PNA and Israel, we are defining areas in which movement members may join in talks with other factions; administering daily affairs in regions where withdrawal has completed by actively participating in PA ministries and several institutions; local elections for cities and villages, professional associations and unions; involvement in some of the security services of a police character, criminal inspections and fire fighting.”

In spite of this, Hamas’ members would not be permitted to actively participate in elections to the Legislative Council or to leadership of the PNA, nor in any affairs regarding the policy of the PNA’s security services and of vacated settlements or any arrangements pertaining to them.\textsuperscript{62} Hamas also stated that it would not surrender its weapons but it was willing to correspond “on a treatise of honor in this concern that will manage the problematic nature and complexity of arms usage for objectives that are not the armed struggle.” The document advocated, in part, specified priorities and matters. First, the Islamists were preparing themselves for probably working with the PNA, identifying the conditions for their assistance in some form of mutual arrangement, even though it was ambiguous that what kind of cooperation they would assume and what their upcoming military strategies would be. Second, the document highlighted the significance of greater interaction between groups and possibly acknowledged the need for a more feasible strategy, domestic and “foreign.” And third, it expressed a greater acceptance of the PNA and the urgent need for reform, a stand the Islamists communicated with other Fatah factions.\textsuperscript{63}

After Yasser Arafat’s death in November 2004, Palestinians realized themselves in a transitional phase with a leadership that had lacked popular mandate to govern. Governmental institutions existed but lacked legitimacy, in large part due to the Arafat’s attack against them and his incapacity to understand them. The Palestinian society was characterized by a growing religiosity, with general Palestinian public turning increasingly to religion for support, consolation, and solidarity. This can be observed through the considerably increased number of persons wearing conservative dress, including women’s head scarves and veils.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.,
Islamic ideas of zakat and helping the poor in general and the significance of Muslims helping those in need were revived.

In fact, in the prolonged absence of viable political substitutes and in the light of the continued deterioration of existing institutions, public progressively turned toward religion as a source of solace, knowledge, and a sense of protectedness. This was due to Hamas’ continued popularity, to which the movement was trying to respond and was being discussed at the grassroots level in the Gaza Strip. There were two major trends within the debate over the Islamist’s grassroots support. First there were those who claimed that in spite of the successful Israeli attack against its leadership structure, Hamas was constantly achieving strength and popularity mostly from the services offered by its social and charitable institutions, and from the continued perception of Hamas by the people as the only practical political faction fighting the occupation and opposing the brutality and corruption of Fatah. As the political and economic situations were rapidly worsening in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after 2000, the move to emergency aid was felt immediately. A data provided by the World Bank revealed that approximately 21 percent of the Palestinian population (650,000) was living in poverty at the time of the second Intifada, a figure that enlarged to 33 percent by December 2000, 46 percent by December 2001, and almost 60 percent (1.9 million) by December 2002. As a result of population growth, the number of people living in poverty reached three times larger between pre–September 2000 and December 2002.64 By 2003, nearly 75 percent of Gaza’s populations were poor, as were 50 percent of West Bankers, the situation that was obviously due to the Israel’s 2002 military operation in the West Bank.65

The figures provided by the United Nations were similar to those of the World Bank, with 32 percent of the population (more than one million people) getting some kind of emergency aid during the last quarter of 2000 – 340,000 people in the West Bank and 693,000 in the Gaza Strip.66 The World Bank found that the “economic

64 World Bank, Twenty-Seven Months – Intifada, Closures and Palestinian Economic Crisis: An Assessment (Jerusalem, May 2003), p. 31.
65 Ibid.,
66 Riccardo Bocco, Matthias Brunner, and Jamil Rabah, International and Local Aid during the Second Intifada, an Analysis of Palestinian Public Opinion in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (October 2000
crisis has severely compromised family welfare. Many households were running without work or incomes for long periods, and in spite of the various employment generation endeavors of the PNA, donors and NGOs, many are now reliant on food aid for their daily survival. To deal with the conditions has meant selling assets, borrowing from neighbors, families and shopkeepers and cutting consumption, together with food. In an increasing number of families, shortages are now manifesting as malnutrition. . . . The erratic provision of basic health, education and water services is further compromising the environment in which young Palestinians are growing up."  

The deterioration in the normal living conditions of the Palestinian population was worsened by Israel’s refusal to transfer Palestinian tax revenues, which considerably reduced the PNA’s revenue base and, hence, its ability to deliver basic social services. In this prevailing scenario, Islamic organizations had an important role to play, facilitating basic social services that the PNA could not, or to deal them in a more efficient manner. Actually, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), the most important service providers at this time were charitable organizations and NGOs as a whole, reaching almost 60 percent of all recipients from regular and emergency programs. The second major service provider was UNRWA, whose services touched over 34 percent, and then by the PNA Ministry of Social Affairs at hardly 6 percent.  

The growing economic crisis of the time were responsible for alarmed level of poverty, a large numbers of Palestinians were in urgent need of emergency relief (especially food and cash) a sort of aid associated with Islamic social service organizations, whose role became very important. In 2001, according to the ICG, these Islamic social service organizations in collaboration with the zakat committees formed the single largest food benefactor in the West Bank and the Gaza

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Strip after UNRWA.\textsuperscript{69} The PNA’s weakened financial capacity which had “been even inefficient to fulfill the salary expenses of public sector employees and operational costs of basic services, and UNRWA’s chronic shortages of funds and the very limited excess capability of secular NGOs, the role of Islamic organizations was indispensable and, in some instances, irreplaceable.”\textsuperscript{70}

The PNA supported and refrained to become a hindrance in the work of the Islamic social sector. However, this support was conditional and subject to the occasional closing of Islamic social organizations, seizing of their assets, and external supervision of their governing bodies. These types of measures were periodically used by PNA after an attack inside Israel and in reaction to outside pressure especially from the United States or Israel. Most of these organizations were soon capable to resume their operations – some officially and others unofficially. As the PNA was increasingly incapable to fill the resultant void, Islamic organizations were more than tolerated. This further encouraged the presence of Islamic institutions in Palestinians everyday life but mostly as donors, not innovators. Hamas did not challenge the PNA’s work or methods but to a certain extent complemented them which lacked by their secular civic counterparts. Actually, during the early years of the Intifada, Hamas made a praiseworthy effort to better harmonize their activities with the PNA and their non-Islamic counterparts. This endeavor was due to the Hamas search for accommodation that defined his relations with PNA and the PNA inability and reluctance to restrict Hamas.\textsuperscript{71}


In the meantime, however, times had obviously changed, not just because Arafat was no longer there, but because PNA was weak and Hamas was strongly demonstrating with each passing day its intention to take full part in the representative institutions available to Palestinians. Hamas decided to stop its boycott of the PNA and instead to enter its halls of power. The first step was participation in local elections. In fact, entering the public sphere at a local level had never posed either an ideological problem or a problem in terms of political practice for Hamas. This was primarily administrative form of participation and therefore perfectly coherent with its focus on the welfare services that were no doubt in the interest of the community and which had already been pursued by Islamic Movement for years. Running local administration was never viewed incompatible with a political with a political stand opposed to the PNA. The elections of 2004 – 2005, however, took on a very different meaning: they represented a “soft” entry into the institutions of PNA, as well as providing a necessary test of the real consensus they met with at the grassroots level.

The first round of local and municipal elections in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was conducted in two parts: on 23 December 2004, in twenty-six constituencies in the West Bank and on 27 January 2005, in ten constituencies in the Gaza Strip. Local elections for all other constituencies were scheduled for May, September, and December 2005. These local elections were the first performed in the occupied territories in almost thirty years; as such, they were a landmark political event that severely and lawfully challenged the continued dominance of the Fatah movement. The municipal elections in the West Bank produced result that Hamas leadership itself had not expected. The first round election was particularly significant since it “became a test of each organization’s electoral competence and strength among the voters. The competition between Hamas and Fatah was tough, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Hamas began to draw attention to specific issues that were central

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74 Ibid.,
to the Palestinian public, concentrating on an agenda of political and social reform (which Fatah greatly lacked) in districts where Fatah was inadequate and apparently incompetent of remediation.\footnote{Meir Litvak, “Hamas’s Victory in Municipal Elections,” \textit{Tel Aviv Notes}, No. 156, (December 26, 2005).} All over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Hamas was able to snatch power from Fatah in many of its traditional strongholds (for example, Nablus). Therefore, in addition to its substantial social service network, Hamas established itself, by the fall of 2005, in majority control of several local councils in the Gaza Strip with access to Gaza’s (and to a lesser degree the West Bank’s) institutional infrastructure and attendant constituencies it had never before possessed.\footnote{International Crisis Group (ICG), \textit{Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration} (Amman/Brussels: ICG, January 18, 2006), No. 82, pp. 10-11.} Remarking this victory, Ghazi Hamad stated: \textit{“the people were voting for us, and this was a sign that the Palestinians wanted a change of leadership, as demonstrated also by the fact that we had just won in areas where we had not been strong until that point.”} The victory in local elections was useful to Hamas, which decided to cash in on the political credit it earned in the following days, when the question of dialogue between the various Palestinian factions returned to the fore.\footnote{Caridi, Paola, \textit{Hamas: From Resistance to Government}, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), p. 172.}

Hamas’ entry into the PNA structures that took place on 17 March, which marked a turning point for Hamas, the date of its formal decision to participation in the political process. This was the day of the Cairo Declaration, which committed thirteen Palestinian factions to a year-long “calm.” This document contains the crucial passage that indicates a watershed moment for Hamas, starting that the factions “agreed on the necessity of completing total reform in all areas, of supporting the democratic process in its various aspects and of holding local and legislative elections at their determined time according to an election law to be agreed upon,” which should be based “on an equal division (of seats) in a mixed system.” Hamas had therefore decided to take part in elections with a majority decision taken by its leadership. This changed the movement’s centre of gravity, giving greater power to
the pragmatic wing, which in 1996 decided to not participate in the first general elections for the PNA. 78

The reason for this change was rooted in the contemporary circumstances, which differed from those in several important points. Azzam Tamimi’s words beautifully summed up both the situation in 2004 and what would later take place in 2005 with the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, an event that was nothing short of a watershed in the Palestinian politics: “Oslo was dead. Arafat and Yassin had gone. The Israelis were leaving Gaza.” The debasement of the Oslo process, eventually dealt a mortal blow by the Al-Aqsa Intifada, was therefore crucial for Hamas’s own transition. It became one of the important features of the Cairo Agreements of March 2005, which included the participation of groups like Hamas, despite the explicit prohibition on armed groups taking part in elections contained in 1995 interim agreements between Israelis and Palestinians. Thus, for Hamas it would have been easier to accept a formal entry into the PNA by way of a parliamentary presence if some of the bonds of the Oslo Accords- which had rendered the Authority dependent on Israel- had been loosened. 79 Hamas shift toward participation occurred in a context of mutual hostility: the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, which has never once stopped over the course of six decades. In other words, the transformation Hamas underwent after 2004 did not follow the expectations of standard conflict resolution theories. As pointed by Alastair Crooke, “Hamas and other Islamist groups continue to see themselves as resistance movements, but increasingly they see the prospect that their organizations may evolve into political currents that are focused on nonviolent resistance.” The problem was that Hamas’s ability to maintain the strength of an armed group was in itself part of the reason the movement was able to maintain its legitimacy and support among its base. These were not veterans of a conflict who had to be helped to rejoin society in peacetime, nor were this a transition toward solely moderate Islamist positions. Hamas was still Hamas, even after it decided to take part in the PNA’s representative institutions, even after it became clear that between 2004 and 2007 the pragmatic wing of the so called doves managed to gain majority consensus among activists.

78 Ibid., pp. 172-175.
79 Ibid.,
Ghazi Hamad wrote barely three weeks before the elections, when there was
still possibility of delaying them: “Hamas, however, is unlikely to resort to violence.
The lack of law and order, which in the public mind is blamed on the PNA and the
absence of the security forces, is a major reason for the growing popularity of the
movement. Hamas would not want to come to be seen as a contributing factor.”
Hamas was therefore very cautious to consensus, just like other organizations based
on mass mobilization.\(^80\)

However, just after winning elections reforms were instantly implemented in
various communities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank with varying degrees of
achievement that concentrated mostly on infrastructural developments long ignored
by earlier governments such as plans to redevelop Rafah’s commercial center.\(^81\) In
March, Hamas proclaimed that it would take part in forthcoming legislative elections,
which were then planned for July 2005. Encouraged by its victory in local elections,
Hamas widened its domestic agenda in its legislative platform to consist of service
provision (care for the poor, social welfare), economic development (minimizing
unemployment, promoting foreign investment, and free market proposals),
constructing a strong civil society and viable political institutions, good governance,
and monetary management and accountability – in brief, comprehensive but not
revolutionary change and reform.\(^82\)

The stress on a secular program within parameters outlined ideologically
rather than on religious ideology (or on religiosity) itself – policies with precedent in
the Oslo period – was a key to Hamas’ electoral victories. Not only did this permitted
the Islamist party to concretely address the socio-economic and political concerns of
its constituents; it made Hamas to form pragmatic alliances with non-believers and
non-supporters including Marxists, Secularists and Christians and to follow a larger

\(^80\) Ibid.,

\(^81\) International Crisis Group (ICG), Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration
(Amman/Brussels: ICG, January 18, 2006), No. 82, pp. 10-11.

(Summer 2006), pp. 23-24. See also, Tamimi, Azzam, Hamas: Unwritten Chapters, (London: Hurst
form of civic and political engagement.83 (In this concern Hamas also claimed that Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip in August 2005 was the result of successful strategy it has always adhered to: armed confrontation against occupying force, and no concessions on the peace process. Resistance, the Islamist movement said, brought true results on the ground, and the withdrawal was a clear demonstration of this fact: Israel was abandoning Gaza, just as it had abandoned Southern Lebanon. Thus, it was a forced withdrawal that resulted from Hamas’ continued confrontation, for which the movement also won public support).84 Actually, religious references in Hamas’ legislative electoral platform amounted to “about a page and a half out of the entire fourteen pages document,” pointing to a more flexible interpretation of religion – and largely influenced by the existing political, social and economic, conditions also seen during the Oslo period. Undoubtedly, the majority of Hamas’ elected legislators and municipal councilors were professionals and community leaders with a secular image in contrast to a strictly religious nature, strongly emphasized that socio-economic and political issues were more important than religious ones in Hamas’ whole political agenda and strategies.85

Another essential aspect that contributed in winning grassroots support was Hamas’ strong stress on involving people in the formation of its election program via grassroots consultations and surveys,86 a model of consultation and attachment that to varying degrees also differentiated its social program throughout the Oslo period. Indeed, Hamas’ 2006 electoral program openly addressed to the significance of involving the people in its decision-making process and decentralization of power in running the administration and execution of its various programs.87

86 Ibid., p. 146.