ABSTRACT

Throughout the history Palestine had been a field of battles because of its geo-strategic and religious significance. Palestine is generally divided into four geographical zones: the Coastal Area, the Mountain Area, Al-Ghour (the Rift Valley), and the Desert Area. Palestine enjoys four different climates with the lowest point on earth and mountains of 1200m altitude above sea level, with lakes and seas among one is known for its highest salt concentration that left it with no marine life. All these features are assembled in a small piece of land which altogether makes it the most productive land in the whole world.

Religiously, it is the Holy Land for all three major religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) and to some extent other sects as well. Almost half of the world’s population considers it, or at least some part of it as Holy and no other land on this earth is considered Holy by such a large number of people.

However, the Arab – Israel or Palestinian – Israel conflict has its origin when the State of Israel came into existence on 14 May 1948. Although, Israel was created through the U.N. Partition Resolution of 29 September 1947 which allocated 56 percent territory of Palestine to the Israel but it occupied 77 percent of the Palestinian land together with a large part of the Jerusalem in 1948. Not only this, in 1967 six-day war remaining Palestinian territories was also occupied by Israel such as the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. This led to the formation of many secular nationalist movements in which Fatah, PLO, PFLP and DLFP were important. Despite these secular movements, other movements were also taking shape in the background. These movements were Islamic movements in which Hamas and Islamic Jihad were the most important.

Hamas an acronym for an original Arabic name Harkat al-Mokwama al-Islamiya, which means ‘Zeal’ was officially founded on 14 December 1987 but its roots go back to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood which was founded by a school teacher Hassan al-Banna. Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, who has been considered as the
founder of Hamas was active in Palestinian politics since 1970s. Greatly influenced by the ideas and teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin formed an Islamic Society in 1976. By 1978, he felt the need for a bigger and better organization to promote Islamic values in the Palestinian society. This thought led him to establish Islamic Compound. However, Maktura incident of Jabaliya refugee camp was an immediate cause for the formation of Hamas. The incident started a revolution against Israeli occupation which is popularly known as the Intifada. Hamas participated in the Intifada with full force and played a significant role in managing and spreading it.

Hamas adopted its Charter on 18 August 1988, which contains its basic ideological commitments and proclaims its goal, means for the realization of goal and Hamas’ world view. Hamas clearly states that it derives its ideology from Islam and its goal is to liberate all of historic Palestine. According to Hamas’ Charter, Jihad is the only means through which realization of its proclaimed goal is possible. It showed its total opposition to any arrangement or agreement because in Hamas’ view, they are meaningless in the Palestinian context.

Hamas role in Palestinian politics can be witnessed since its formation, but its role greatly increased when the Oslo Accords were signed between PLO and Israel. Hamas strongly rejected the Accords and mutual recognition of Israel and PLO. Hamas called the Accords as treason to Islam because they implied the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland and legitimization of the existence of the Zionist entity. The PLO leadership and Yasser Arafat were blamed for having sold out the whole fatherland at low price because they were tired of fighting. Hamas repeatedly stated that these are capitulation treatise, not peace agreements.

The Palestinian National Authority was established as a result of the Oslo Accords. In May 1994, 10,000-men-strong Palestinian police force rolled into Gaza and Jericho, paving the way for assumption of control in those areas from which Israel withdrew according to the Accords. On 1st July 1994, Arafat shifted from Tunis to Gaza, with great fanfare and ceremony and became the head of the PNA. From 1993 onwards, Hamas adopted a policy of controlled armed struggle against Israel and avoided a direct confrontation with the PNA. Despite the PNA’s severe crackdown on Hamas, it remained passive in its relation to the PNA.

The first general elections within the territories of the PNA were scheduled on 15 January 1996. The president of the PNA and the members of the Palestinian
Assembly were to be elected. The elections were conducted across most of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; 88 members of the Palestinian Legislative Assembly were elected and Yasser Arafat was elected as the chairman of the PNA. Hamas together with other Palestinian factions boycotted the elections. Hamas opposed the election because of their view that any participation would implicitly recognize the Oslo Accords.

The Al-Aqsa Intifada broke out in September 2000 when Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount on which Al-Aqsa Mosque is situated. Sharon’s visit outraged Palestinians, who viewed it as an insensitive attempt to assert Israeli authority over the site. It was initially carried out by Tanzim (“Organization”) and Al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades both of which organizations were affiliated with Fatah. When Arafat proved ineffective or unwilling to control the violence, Israel attacked the Arafat’s police forces, destroyed his helicopters, and isolated the PLO leadership in its headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Initially, Hamas decided to keep quiet and was not involved in the Intifada. As the uprising progressed together with the decline of the Tanzim and the PNA, Hamas showed a willingness to take part in the Intifada. Thus, Hamas jumped into the Intifada and became the dominant face of the uprising.

By 2004, the PNA had lost considerable control over the Gaza Strip and Yasser Arafat faced perhaps his greatest challenge of the preceding decade. In January 2004, Hamas proposed a ten year hudna or truce in exchange for Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem without committing any political recognition or compromise. The Hamas political shift was the result of Israel’s success in further weakening its military capacity through its assassination campaign and regular raids into Palestinian towns and cities. During 2002 and 2004, Hamas had lost almost all its prominent leaders in Gaza as well as its founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.

In April 2004, Sharon’s announcement of his willingness to disengage from Gaza (from which he has subsequently withdrawn in September 2005) and Arafat’s death in November 2004 proved to be a critical turning point for Hamas. His successor Mahmud Abbas, in order to re-legitimize and rehabilitate the Palestinian political system announced a series of elections: municipal elections between December 2004 and January 2005, presidential election in January 2005, and legislative elections in January 2006. Abbas’s realization that this endeavor of re-
legitimization could not succeed without Hamas’ participation, nor could it sustain Hamas’ continued opposition. Thus, he offered Hamas a form of power sharing in exchange for cessation of violence. Eager to become a part of the political mainstream and administrative apparatus of Gaza in the event of Israeli disengagement was very important to the Hamas. In fact, Hamas was no longer willing to play the role of rejectionist opposition, realizing the inefficiency of armed struggle in the absence of political engagement. Hamas’ strategy was one of gradual political integration, which would provide Hamas greater legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

In the meantime, the situation had obviously changed, not because Arafat was no more there, but because the PNA was weak. With each passing day Hamas was strongly demonstrating its intention to fully participate in the elections. The first step was participation in local elections. The municipal elections were held between December 2004 and January 2005. Throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Hamas successfully snatched power from Fatah in many of its traditional strongholds. By the end of 2005, Hamas found itself in majority control of local councils in Gaza with access to Gaza’s (to some extent the West Bank’s) institutional infrastructure and attendant constituencies it had never before possessed.

However, just after winning elections, reforms were immediately implemented in several communities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank with varying degree of success that focused mostly on infrastructural improvements long set aside by previous governments. In March, Hamas announced that it would participate in upcoming legislative elections, which were then scheduled for July 2005 but later on extended to January 2006. Greatly encouraged by its success in municipal elections, Hamas broadened its domestic agenda in its legislative platform to include service provisions such as social welfare, care for the poor, economic reforms, building strong and viable state institutions, good governance, financial scrutiny and accountability.

Hamas successfully utilized the Israeli Disengagement from Gaza in September 2005 and proclaimed that it was Hamas’ continued armed struggle which forced Israel to withdraw from Gaza. The political vacuum created by Arafat’s death and upcoming January 2006 elections provided a great opportunity for Hamas’ political participation. The circumstances had changed dramatically by 2006. The peace process was in tatters and Fatah was increasingly weakened and shattered. Fatah and Mahmud Abbas were unable to manage law and order or deteriorating
economic conditions. Now the political system was open for Hamas’ participation with presumed success.

On 26 January 2006, the elections were held for the Palestinian Legislative Councils in which Hamas won 74 seats out of 132. The landslide victory of Hamas shocked the entire world. Hamas made history by sweeping away the Fatah’s monopoly of power in free and fair democratic elections. A new phase in Palestinian politics dominated by Islamic culture began.

Although, Hamas won the political battle in January 2006 but they had severe difficulty in exercising it. Hamas subsequently came under heavy pressure just after their electoral victory as U.S. and European Union insisted that Hamas must recognize the State of Israel, renounce violence and recognize the previous agreements. When Hamas refused to do so, economic and aid sanctions were imposed on the Palestinian Authority.

After its electoral victory in January 2006, Hamas announced that it was willing to form a National Unity Government with Fatah and other Palestinian factions represented in the PLC. As Fatah refused to participate in a government of national unity, the cabinet formed by the PLC at the end of March 2006 was made up exclusively of members and allies of Hamas. After more than a year of intense negotiations, and Palestinians on the threshold of a civil war, Saudi mediation led to a summit meeting in Mecca in February 2007. The summit brought together the President, Prime Minister and other responsible parties in Fatah and Hamas. The parties reached an agreement for forming a national unity cabinet based on Document of National Accord to which was added respect for the agreements signed by the PLO and explicit reference to Arab resolutions. Thus, Hamas and Fatah together with a large number of other secular forces formed the first ever fragile Palestinian Unity Government in March 2007.

On 17 March 2007, the PLC approved a National Unity Cabinet with Ismail Haniyeh as Prime Minister, accompanied by a Fatah Vice-Prime Minister. The PFLP and Islamic Jihad refused to become associated with the executive; the cabinet consisted of 12 Hamas’ ministers, 6 Fatah ministers, 4 ministers from “small” parties and 3 independents.

Power sharing proved to be more difficult than expected, particularly in the field of security. The factional conflict between Hamas and Fatah culminated in June 2007, with scenes in Gaza resembling a civil war. The Palestinian factional conflict
led to a political division of the Palestinian territories divided in a West Bank under the control of Mahmud Abbas and a Gaza Strip controlled by democratically elected Hamas government. This resulted in an eventual breakdown in the National Unity Government.

The intra-factional violence which resulted in subsequent Hamas’ takeover of Gaza and confined Fatah to the West Bank was also rooted in the U.S. government’s plan to weaken and ultimately overthrow Hamas-led government. Although, both Hamas and Fatah were responsible in creating chaos, but foreign powers have also contributed directly to the ignition. Following the Hamas’ takeover of Gaza, Israel and other major players in the international community strengthened their siege, isolating Hamas even more and punishing the whole Gazan population.

Hamas and Israel indirectly agreed through Egyptian mediation to six-month truce in June 2008. In return for suspension of attacks, Hamas believed that Israel would allow the flow of goods and workers through Gaza border crossing. The first five months of the truce were relatively good. On 4 November 2008, the ceasefire was broken before its natural term. Israeli tanks under the cover of IAF entered a few meters into the Gaza Strip. The official justification was that the tanks were attempting to destroy a tunnel which was being used by the Palestinian militants in order to capture Israeli soldiers. Hamas’ military wing retaliated immediately and fired dozen of rockets against Israeli cities in the Negev. On 27 December 2008, Israel began an extensive military campaign known as “Operation Cast Lead” against Hamas in the Gaza Strip with the objective to counter Hamas’ rockets fires into Southern Israel and generally, to severely weaken all aspects of Hamas’ rule in Gaza. From 27 December to 19 January, the entire Gaza Strip was pounded by airstrikes, artillery bombardments and infantry attacks. After tough negotiations with Egyptian officials, Hamas accepted a ceasefire, which provided that Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip in a week’s period. Both parties agreed verbally to the truce and Musa Abu Marzuq announced it publicly at noon on 18 January 2009. Israel withdrew its troops before the deadline.

After the Operation Cast Lead, the Mavi Marmara incident of 31 May 2010 took place which shocked the whole world. The Mavi Marmara was the largest ship in a convoy of six ships that sailed from Istanbul under Turkish flag and intended to break the siege Israel had imposed on the Gaza Strip by bringing 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid. The Israeli Navy’s special operation unit Shayetet 13, along with a
helicopter attacked *Mavi Marmara*. This incident resulted in nine deaths in which all were Turks.

From 9 March to 14 March 2012, the IDF launched a military operation Codenamed “**Operation Returning Echo**”. It was the most violent eruption of hostility covered by the media in the territory since the Operation Cast Lead of 2008 – 2009. On 9 March 2012, Israel launched targeted airstrikes in the Gaza Strip, which killed the secretary general of PRC, Zohair al-Qaisi. Palestinian fighters retaliated by firing rockets on Israel, with more than 300 Grad missiles, mortar shells and Qassam rockets, of which 177 struck Israeli territory, hitting the main urban centers of Ashkelon, Ashdod and Beersheba, besides smaller communities. In this attack twenty-three Israelis were wounded, mostly civilians. Israel attacked with airstrike and targeted Gazan weapon storage sites, weapon manufacturing facilities, rocket launching sites, training centers, posts, tunnels and militants, killing 22, most of them were members of Islamic Jihad and others from PRC. Four civilians were also killed in this attack. At least 74 Palestinians were reportedly wounded in the attack, mostly civilians. Hamas did not take part in the fighting openly and asserted that a full-fledged war would be “destructive to the Palestinians”.

**Operation Pillar of Defense** was an eight-day military operation by the IDF in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, formally launched on 14 November 2012 with the killing of Ahmad Jabari, the head of the Gaza military wing of Hamas. The operation was launched in response to the Palestinian groups firing more than 100 rockets at Israel within 24-hour period, a strike on Israeli military jeep inside Israel borders by Gazan militants, and a tunnel blast caused by IEDs close to the IDF on Israeli side of the fence. The Israeli government declared that the aim of the military operation was to stop the rocket attacks directed against civilian targets launched from the Gaza Strip and to weaken the capabilities of militant groups. At the end of the operation, as stated by Gaza officials, 133 Palestinians had been killed of which 53 were civilians, 79 militants and a police officer and estimated that 840 Palestinians were wounded. A lot of families were displaced. Till the end of the operation, six Israelis had been killed and 240 wounded due to the Palestinians rocket firings. On 21 November a ceasefire was proclaimed after days of negotiations between Hamas and Israel mediated by Egypt. Both Hamas and Israel claimed victory.

Hamas exiled leader Khaled Mishal visit followed a ceasefire, which brought an end to the conflict between Hamas and Israel. He entered Gaza City from Egypt at
the Rafah border crossing and kissed the ground in celebration. Khaled Mishal said on his first ever visit to Gaza on Friday, 7 December 2012 that he wished to become a “martyr” there. “I hope God will make me a martyr on the land of Palestine in Gaza”, Mishal said just after crossing from Egypt to Gaza. While addressing media he stated that “I consider this moment my third birth and pray to God that my fourth birth will be the moment when all of Palestine is liberated”. Mishal had been banned for years from entering the Palestinian territories via crossing controlled by Israel. Entry from Egypt had been blocked by expelled president Hosni Mubarak, but was facilitated by the country’s new Islamist-led government.

After Khaled Mishal visit, a rapprochement seems to be taking place between Hamas and Fatah. Mishal has been a strong supporter of reconciliation between the two factions. Indications that the two factions may be moving quickly towards rapprochement comprise Abbas expressing congratulations to Hamas on its “victory” in eight-day war with Israel and Hamas’ support for Abbas’s U.N. Statehood proposal. Abbas was also referred to addressing a meeting of the Palestinian Authority leadership one week prior to the Mishal’s visit of Gaza: “It is time to seriously deal with reconciliation… this question has gone for too long.”