

The political failure of the PLO and the origins of Hamas

Part 2

Jean Shaoul
6 July 2002

This is Part two in a three part series. Part one was posted on July 5. Part three was published July 8, 2002.

The Arabs' second defeat at the hands of Israel in 1973 was accompanied by an oil boycott of those nations supporting Israel and a quadrupling of oil prices. This served to enrich the reactionary feudal regimes of the Arabian Peninsula, which had their own disputes with Nasser's Egypt, and to enhance their influence. Militant Islamic groups benefited from the newfound wealth of the oil-rich states both directly and indirectly. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States poured money into the Brotherhood and other similar groups to counter and suppress the growth of any progressive political tendencies within the working class that might threaten their position. The Egyptian and Jordanian movements also benefited from the remittances of workers who had gone to the Gulf in search of work.

Popular support for Islamic groups began to grow in Iran, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Gaza, particularly among the most impoverished layers and the rural poor. The success of religious opposition to the Shah's tyrannical regime in Iran and the 1979 revolution offered proof that an Islamic state could be established. It inspired and promoted a network of Shi'ite groups, including Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shi'ite opposition elements to the Iraqi regime, and Shi'ite minorities in the Gulf states. The success of the Iranian revolution also encouraged the growth of other Islamic tendencies, including Sunni groups.

There was another important sponsor of militant Islamic groups. Washington played a crucial role in promoting their growth to provide a counter to Moscow's influence in the Middle East and internationally, as a political weapon against radical nationalists such as the Ba'ath Party in Syria, as ballast for the reactionary monarchs of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and as an explicitly anti-Communist force through which to divert the oppressed masses with radical sounding rhetoric.

From 1980-89, the CIA provided the largest covert aid programme in US history to Afghanistan in order to destabilise the Soviet Union. It financed and armed the most extreme of the *mujahidin* groups, including Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network, fighting the Soviet backed Afghan regime in Kabul. Such US sponsored groups have in turn been crucial in promoting the growth of militarily trained Islamic forces in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, occupied Palestine, and elsewhere.

The US attitude towards Islamic militancy began to change after the Iranian revolution, which removed from power America's main ally and the custodian of its interests in the Gulf. From its inception, the revolution took on an explicitly anti-American and anti-Zionist character.

Islamic militancy was beginning to harm the interests of the US and its Middle East allies more broadly. In November 1979, a group of militant Islamic opponents to the Saudi regime took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The Saudis were only able put down the revolt at the cost of

hundreds of lives, with the help of Jordanian and French military advisors. Then in 1981, the very opposition forces that Egypt's President Sadat had promoted called for an armed uprising against him. Shortly afterwards, he was assassinated by Islamic Jihad army officers opposed to his peace treaty with Israel. In April 1983 in Lebanon, where US forces were openly involved in supporting the Israeli-installed and Maronite backed President, Amin Gemayel, Islamic Jihad destroyed the US embassy. In October, another suicide mission destroyed the US Marine Corps barracks. Over the next few years, several Shi'ite militias held US personnel and other Westerners as hostages, while Hezbollah launched raids against Israeli troops in occupied south Lebanon. By 1984, Reagan was forced to admit that the US position was untenable and withdrew US forces from Lebanon.

The rise of political Islam in the Occupied Territories

With the PLO confined to Tunis after September 1982 and without support from the Soviet bureaucracy and the Arab bourgeois states, Arafat played less and less of a role in directing the ongoing struggle of the masses in the Occupied Territories and came to be identified in the popular imagination with passivity and corruption. He had all but renounced the armed struggle in favour of diplomatic manoeuvring, under conditions where the Palestinians had fallen off the Arab regimes' radar screen. The Arab Summit Conference at Amman in November 1987, called primarily to address the Iran-Iraq war, only added the Palestinian issue to the agenda as an afterthought and issued no major resolutions regarding Palestine. The PLO was increasingly riven with murderous conflicts that took place openly on the streets of London and Paris.

Once again the Brotherhood was able to fill the political vacuum left by the crisis of secular nationalism. It was aided in this task by generous funding from the Arab bourgeoisie, who viewed the Palestinian question as a dangerous source of radical anti-imperialist sentiment and a threat to their own privileges. They all sought to develop the Brotherhood as a counterweight to the PLO and as a means of dividing the Palestinian working class.

Fostered by Jordan, the Brothers in Gaza joined forces with the Brothers in the West Bank and Jordan to become part of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. The Brotherhood used the money that poured in from Saudi Arabia and the Jordanian monarchy to build up its network of mosques, cultural organisations and welfare services that were to provide a lifeline to the impoverished Palestinians.

The leader of the Brothers in Gaza was Shaikh Ahmad Yasin, a teacher,

who was born in Mandate Palestine in 1936. He came from a prosperous middle class landowning family that fled in 1948 and settled in a refugee camp in Gaza. He set up the Islamic Congress in 1973 as a front for the Brotherhood to control all its religious, educational and social activities.

The Brotherhood's primary goal was the "founding of the Islamic Personality". Despite its call for the destruction of the state of Israel, when the time was right, it abstained from all forms of anti-occupation activity. It gave precedence instead to the cultural struggle against the PLO's "atheist" commitment to secular nationalism.

Shaikh Yasin never concealed his dislike of Yasser Arafat. "Pork eaters and wine drinkers", was his contemptuous denunciation of the secular PLO leadership. He was even more hostile towards communism and left nationalist factions such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).

For this reason, the Brothers received additional support from an unexpected quarter: Israel. The Zionist state and its security forces actively encouraged the Brotherhood as an alternative to the PLO. Its opposition to terrorism and emphasis on charitable and educational activities made it preferable to the PLO, despite its call for the destruction of Israel. The Israeli occupation authorities viewed the Islamic groups as a useful tool for fomenting dissension within the Palestinians. The former military governor of Gaza, General Yitzhak Segev, explained how he had financed the Islamic movement as a counterweight to the PLO and Stalinists. According to the journalist Graham Usher, he said, "The Israeli government gives me a budget and we extend some financial aid to Islamic groups via Mosques and religious schools, in order to help create a force that can stand up against the leftist forces that support the PLO."

David Shieler, a former correspondent of the *New York Times*, wrote: "In 1980, when Islamic militants set fire to the office of the Red Crescent Society in Gaza, headed by Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi, a Communist and PLO supporter, the Israeli army did nothing, intervening only when the mob marched to his home and seemed to threaten him personally."

As early as 1978, the commissioner of Muslim *waqf*, the religious trust, warned Israel against registering and thus recognising the Islamic Congress and allowing it to gain control of the *waqf*. The *waqf* was comprised of lands, shops, businesses and agricultural land and constituted approximately 10 percent of the economy of Gaza Strip. Israel ignored his advice and gave the Brotherhood's front organisation a licence in 1979.

Within a decade, Yassin built the Islamic Congress into a powerful religious, economic and social institution in the Gaza Strip. He developed a welfare network around the mosques, many of which served also as community centres. The number of mosques in the Gaza Strip tripled from 200 to 600 between 1967 and 1987, while the number of worshippers doubled. In the West Bank, the number of mosques went from 400 to 750 in the same period. Women were required to cover their heads and wear robes over their clothes, and young men to grow beards. Sport was used to draw in the youth and bind them to the Islamic League.

The Brotherhood targeted youth in the villages and refugee camps, school students, teachers, civil servants, and particularly the poor. It shunned workers and women in trade unions and professional organisations. While eschewing violence against Israel "until the time was right", its youth trashed shops, cafes and businesses selling alcohol and threatened and harassed the population to force them to return to supposedly traditional Islamic ways and abstain from Western style music, past-times and habits.

It carried out organised attacks on the PLO and its organisations, and clashed with student supporters of the PLO and left groups in the universities. After a series of particularly violent clashes between 1982 and 1986, it took over Al Azhar, the Islamic University in Gaza, where it purged the school of PLO supporters in a mini-civil war against the PFLP

and its Stalinist supporters and turned the staff and students into a reserve of 700 "soldiers". It was only when Fatah indicated that it would no longer stand aside and let its supporters be ousted in this way, that Israel took action to stop the fighting.

The Muslim Brothers and the Intifada

In December 1987, a spontaneous rebellion broke out amongst the Palestinian youth and working class, catching the Brothers off guard. The Intifada was the product of the harsh conditions of the Israeli occupation and the deteriorating economic situation. In Gaza, conditions were dire. In 1986, there were 634,000 Palestinians, concentrated in a narrow strip of sandy soil 28 miles long and 3.5 to 8 miles wide. The population was increasing at the rate of 4.3 percent a year. In 1988, 59 percent of the population was under 19 years of age, and 76.9 percent were under 29. Today the population will have grown by 50 percent, to about one million.

Yet, the Gaza Strip lacked the basic infrastructure to cope with its existing population. There was an inadequate supply of clean drinking water. Sanitation did not exist and there was little land, whether for housing, agriculture, schools or hospitals. To cap it all, Israel was holding "state lands" in reserve for the few Jewish settlers in the area: some 2,500 people. While the settlers comprised a mere 0.4 percent of the population, they had already been awarded 28 percent of the state lands and were demanding more.

The Palestinian economy was entirely subordinated to Israel's determination to protect its own industries and ensure a market free from competition in the Occupied Territories. As Palestinian farmers were squeezed out of the market, their credit was cut, their yield per acre shrank and the acreage under cultivation followed suit. Such industry as existed could find no outlet in either Israel or Jordan following Jordan's embargo on the import of manufactured goods from occupied Palestine.

The Palestinians therefore became almost totally dependent upon finding work in Israel. But even in this, they were hindered by the Civil Administration, from whom they had to seek documentation to travel and work. As Israeli defence correspondents, Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, acknowledged in their book, *The Intifada*, "The result was that in more ways than one, painful as it is to admit, a 'slave market' of sorts came into being in the territories."

When the Intifada erupted in December 1987, the main source of resistance to Zionist domination became the Palestinian workers and youth, not the PLO guerrillas. The Brotherhood was confronted with a dilemma: maintain its accommodation with Israel and thus its protection, or lose control of the Palestinians to the Unified National Leadership Union (UNLU), which the PLO had set up to co-ordinate and control the uprising.

The Brothers took the decision to establish the Islamic Resistance Movement, known by its acronym Hamas, as an Islamic political party dedicated to national liberation in order to divert the energies of the Palestinian working class and channel it along religious lines.

Its Covenant, published in August 1988, essentially it's founding charter, blended nationalism with religion and naked anti-Semitism. It called for an exclusively Islamic Palestinian state, repudiating the PLO's formulation of a democratic secular state as anti-Islamic, and made territorial nationalism, previously a form of idolatry, into a religious mission or jihad. It called for the destruction of the state of Israel and falsely equated political Zionism with the Jewish people, both within Israel and beyond. The Jews were denounced as the secret architects of both the French Revolution and the Communist revolution, of two World Wars, of creating the League of Nations and the United Nations as secret

organs of world domination and, above all, of being the destroyers of the Islamic Caliphate.

The charter explicitly rejected direct confrontation with the PLO, positioning itself instead as an alternative leadership of the Palestinian people. To this end, Hamas organised independently of the UNLO, issued its own leaflets, and called separate strikes, often on holy days. It intimidated, set fire to and sabotaged shops and businesses that did not respond to its strikes. It refused to acknowledge the “sole representative status” of the PLO.

Hamas led little action against the Israeli occupation authorities, with the result that Israel did not interfere with Hamas-organised strikes. Indeed, Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin even had talks with leading Islamists in the summer of 1988.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact