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THE ROLE OF HAMAS IN THE AQSA INTIFADA

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Since it was founded in 1987, Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) has consistently opposed the peace process. Hamas played an important, if indirect, role in the events leading up to the outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence in September 2000. In general, Hamas terrorism hardened Israeli security positions and led Israel to implement more severe security measures. These, in turn, imposed greater hardships on Palestinians and weakened public support for the peace process, making it even more difficult for the Palestinian Authority (PA) to justify to its own public any concessions in the negotiations.

More immediately, Hamas contributed to the chain of events by waging a vigorous propaganda campaign against alleged Israeli efforts to undermine the foundations of al-Aqsa Mosque. The highly charged atmosphere produced by this campaign explains the violent, albeit spontaneous Palestinian reaction to Ariel Sharon's controversial visit to the Temple Mount on 28 September. And by pointing to al-Aqsa as the spark for the confrontation, Hamas reinforced its argument that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essentially a religious conflict between two polar opposites, in which there can be no compromise.

The current confrontation began as a mass uprising but Yasir Arafat and the PA quickly embraced it as an instrument to change the

parameters of the negotiations and force Israel to accept an agreement more favorable to the Palestinians. This constitutes a victory for Hamas strategy. Since the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, Hamas spokesmen have claimed that the path of negotiations with Israel leads only to concessions, with no *quid pro quo*, since Israel seeks to impose its solution on the Palestinians. They have criticized the PLO for abandoning the military option when it signed the Oslo Accords, thereby renouncing an important means of pressure on Israel. As an alternative to Arafat's strategy, they have advocated the kind of struggle waged by Hizbullah, which led to domestic pressure in Israel and eventually to unilateral Israel withdrawal from Lebanon. Even before the withdrawal, and especially afterward, they have argued that Israel only understands the language of force, and that the only way to confront it and extract concessions from it is therefore the armed struggle, or Jihad.

Since the outbreak of the violence, greater hostility toward Israel and Hamas' role in mobilizing the public have forced the PA, at least for the time being, to end its repression of Hamas. Under public pressure, the PA released almost all Hamas detainees, except for a few who were kept under protective custody, i.e., to protect them from Israel, or for some political figures whose activities were directed primarily



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against the PA itself. The release of Hamas prisoners enabled the movement to rebuild its operational infrastructure, which had been damaged during the previous two years as a result of “work accidents” and the killing of military operatives. In short order, the results were seen in the bombings in Hadera, Netanya, and elsewhere.

But while the PA has adopted Hamas’ operational line of thinking, the relations between them remain problematic, and Arafat’s attitude toward Hamas is ambivalent and highly reserved. This stems from a different view of Palestinian tactics and strategy in the current confrontation. It is also a function of Hamas’ understanding that fundamental differences between the two parties over issues like the character of the emerging Palestinian state and the nature of Palestinian society have been temporarily suppressed but have not disappeared.

Hamas takes satisfaction from the fact that Arafat is now pursuing a course of confrontation with Israel, and the movement’s leaders are prepared to back him as long as he persists in this course. But while Arafat wants to use the confrontation in order to apply pressure on Israel and secure a settlement on favorable terms, Hamas insists, as it has always done, that the struggle is not tactical but rather strategic. In other words, it should not aim to improve Palestinian bargaining positions in a political process. Instead, it should aim to force Israel to withdraw unconditionally, without any Palestinian commitments in return. Consequently, Hamas leaders, notwithstanding the current *détente* between Hamas and the PA, continue to criticize Arafat for what they see as his excessively conciliatory approach to Israel, for his desire to reach some kind of settlement, or even for his willingness to discuss ways to lower the level of violence.

By contrast, Hamas spokesmen have reiterated their aim of “liberating” all of Palestine, from Rosh Hanikra in the north to Rafah in the south and from the desert to the sea. And while they

are willing to accept any Israeli withdrawal, they object to any undertaking involving renunciation of Palestinian claims to all the territory taken by Israel in 1948. In other words, they adhere to the so-called “Lebanese model” that would allow the Palestinians to renew the struggle for national objectives in more favorable conditions, or to an approach that recalls the strategy of stages endorsed by the PLO itself in 1974. Thus, Hamas is confirmed in its strategic concept, which views the current confrontation as merely a stage in a protracted struggle that will eventually produce final victory in the form of Israel’s destruction.

Of course, Hamas recognizes that the intifada has strengthened Arafat’s position, at least in the short term. But they believe that his popularity will last only as long as he persists in his aggressive posture toward Israel and does not concede sacred Palestinian principles. Moreover, they stress that the popular outburst of rage in the territories was also an expression of growing Palestinian frustration with Arafat’s rotten and corrupt regime. Since Arafat cannot solve or substantially change the nature of the PA, they believe that these trends will strengthen Hamas over the long term.

From Hamas’ point of view, any agreement with Israel would be undesirable. But even if this scenario materializes, Hamas leaders do not believe that it would be a serious setback for the movement. As long as the confrontation continues, the number of Palestinian casualties will rise and the economic and social damage will increase, as will the hatred between the two peoples. As a result, any agreement after this round of confrontation will be brittle and riddled with suspicion, and will not herald any real reconciliation. That means that the option of struggle will be preserved until such time as circumstances change in favor of the Arab side and allow the complete realization of Palestinian national objectives.