

How Sharon and the Likud Bloc helped lay the foundation for Hamas and benefit from its terrorism

By Ray Hanania

Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has declared Hamas as one of Israel's greatest threats, but he was one of the architects who encouraged the rise of an Islamic alternative to the Palestine Liberation Organization that gave Hamas its start.

In the past quarter century, Sharon and his Likud government party midwived the birth of Hamas and coddled the rise of Islamic extremists through policies that were more concerned with undermining the peace process.

Sharon's Likud Bloc party's extremist policies even provoked party loyalists to acts of violence that in turn pushed Hamas to expand from "armed struggle" against Israel's military to suicide bombings of civilian targets.

Ironically, the two bitter foes, Likud and Hamas, benefit politically from each other's extremism over the years.

These Likud policies were intended to undermine the influence of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, who was anointed at the Rabat Arab Summit in October 1974 as the only person who could negotiate for the return of the Occupied West Bank, Gaza Strip and Arab East Jerusalem.

But they inadvertently provoked the Islamic movement to evolve to a higher level of terrorism. Their first suicide bombing occurred in April 1994 in response to a Likud-inspired settler fanatics murder of Muslims who were praying at the Hebron Mosque.

The number of Hamas suicide bombings has only steadily increased since, bringing the Middle East today to its worst crisis in decades. In the wake of September 11th, the suicide bombings have taken on a more ominous look and given Likud a stronger mandate to finally achieve their long term goals of destroying not only Arafat but any hope for Palestinian state hood.

Since the second Intifadah began on September 28, 2000, there have been more than 60 suicide bombings all in a 19 month period.

The rise of the violence and suicide bombings have only served to undermine the peace process and weaken Arafat, one of Likud's primary goals, and to undermine the political power of its main Israeli political rival, the Labor Party. On a more personal level for Ariel Sharon, the recent Hamas violence and suicide bombings have allowed him to take what may be his second and last shot at destroying his arch rival, Arafat.

His first try in 1982 to destroy Arafat by assaulting his PLO bases in Lebanon and Beirut ended in embarrassment for Israel, which was forced into a humiliating retreat. Sharon left with his reputation tarnished, blamed for the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian civilians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

As Israel's prime minister, Sharon is personally directing the invasion of the West Bank in what appears to be an effort to finish what he started but failed to do in Lebanon.

Hamas and Likud make strange bedfellows

Historically, Likud and Hamas have been entangled in a mutually beneficial dance of death. Hamas was born out of an Israeli policy based on the Likud Bloc strategy of cultivating an alternative to Arafat that might win the hearts and minds of the Palestinian masses while allowing Israel to extend its control in the occupied territories. ¹

Beginning with the 1977 election of Likud founder Menachem Begin as prime minister, Israel nurtured the rise of the Islamic movement among the Palestinians, first in the Gaza Strip and to a limited degree in the West Bank.

Desperate to prevent Arafat's return under any peace accord and seeking to undermine his popularity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a year later Israel allowed a 42-year old quadriplegic religious leader, Sheik Ahmad Yassin, to license his humanitarian organization, later called Hamas.

Begin's successor was Yitzhak Shamir. Both Begin and Shamir were leaders of the first terrorist organizations that operated in Palestine in the 1940s.

Under Begin and later Shamir, Israel created, funded and controlled the "Village Leagues," a system of local councils managed by Palestinians who were hand-picked by Israel to run local city and village administrations. The plan was devised by Sharon, who was Israel's Defense Minister. Sharon appointed Menahem Milson, a professor of Arabic literature and former Hebrew University Dean, as its first Civil Administration leader in November 1981. Less than one year later, the two broke over Sharon's role in the Sabra and Shatilla massacres and Milson resigned. ²

In 1984, Shamir was forced into a coalition government with Labor Party's Shimon Peres. Under a shared-leadership agreement, Peres held the office for two years until 1986 before returning it to Shamir. During those two years, the Likud party leaders saw firsthand the behind-the-scenes negotiations take place between Labor Party leaders and Arafat, who was exiled in Tunisia.

Within a year, Hamas leaders exploited the funds that Israel directed to the Village Leagues and collected tens of millions more from supportive Arab regimes angry with Arafat. Hamas used the money to operate a network of schools, medical clinics, social service agencies, religious institutions and provide direct services to the poverty stricken Palestinian population.

Always the survivor, Arafat and the PLO agreed in 1988 to accept the "two state" solution based on "land for peace" negotiations. While Likud responded by trying to sell "autonomy" to the Islamicist movement, Hamas reacted angrily to

¹ Unilateral Withdrawal, by Amos Perlmutter, San Francisco Chronicle, March 19, 1986. Page 1

² Planting Poison, By David Bar-Illan, Jerusalem Post, June 7, 1991, page 12.

Arafat's move and its leaders, much to the surprise of Sharon and the Likud, by openly embracing armed struggle against Israel.

The only thing that stopped Hamas from growing further was the return of the Labor Party to power in 1992 and the return of Yasir Arafat to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arafat's first act was to impose controls on Hamas, while Israel moved to more aggressive policies expelling, jailing and even assassinating Hamas leaders.

Hamas terrorism achieves Likud goals

There is a natural affinity that exists in a limited way between the policies and goals of Hamas and the political objectives of the Likud Bloc that has brought them together.

Every time Israeli and Palestinian negotiators appeared ready to take a major step toward achieving peace, an act of Hamas terrorism has scuttled the peace process and has pushed the two sides apart.

The startling ease with which terrorism has undermined peace is a testament to the fragility of the peace process and the political weakness of both Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. Two specific acts of Likud-inspired violence derailed the momentum of the peace process, too.

Terrorism has been the primary common denominator that exists in the up and down relationship between the leadership of Israel's Likud and the Palestinian Hamas movement. It's not that they are working together, but that their goals are the same.

Acts of terrorism can be directly associated with changes in the political leadership of Israel -- influencing the defeat of Labor Party government and the rise of the Likud.

In the last quarter century, Likud Party candidates have served as Israel's prime ministers for 17 years, more than double the eight years served by Labor Party candidates.

Since 1977, four Likud candidates have served five times as prime minister, while three Labor candidates served four times. (Likud's Menachem Begin, 77-83; Likud's Yitzhak Shamir, 83-84; Labor's Shimon Peres, 84-86; Likud's Shamir, 86-92; Labor's Yitzhak Rabin, 92-95; Labor's Peres, 95-96; Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, 96-99; Labor's Ehud Barak, 99-01; Likud's Ariel Sharon, 01-present.)

During the Intifadah (1987- 1993), Hamas violence was mainly directed against Israeli soldiers and security forces, and not civilians. Likud backed Israeli fanatics were also trying to use violence to disrupt the peace process.

Hamas moved from "armed struggle" against Israeli military targets to the more extreme violence in 1994 after a Likud-inspired supporter and settler fanatic, Baruch Goldstein, walked past Israeli guards that February into the Hebron Mosque and gunned down 29 Muslims as they were praying. Goldstein

took a page out of the Likud ideology and hoped the massacre would derail the peace process with Arafat.³

In retaliation in April 1994, a Hamas bomber rammed an explosive laden car into a civilian bus in the Israeli city of Afula, killing eight and wounding 50 people.⁴

Less than one year later, another Likud settler fanatic inspired by Likud rhetoric and policies assassinated Rabin. The murder undermined the Labor Party's future and sabotaged the Israeli-Palestinian peace process pushing all sides back to violence.

Rabin's widow, Leah Rabin, directly placed the blame for her husband's assassination on the Likud party and its anti-peace rhetoric.⁵ Leah Rabin declared that the assassin was incited to violence by the vicious language of Likud's silver-tongued leader, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Politically, Hamas and Israel's Likud Bloc share several common goals, each for different reasons. They both oppose the Land-for-Peace formula and object to the creation of an independent Palestinian State. Hamas seeks to establish an Islamic State in Palestine while the Likud seeks the formal expansion of Israel into the occupied West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem.⁶ Likud seeks to annex the territories providing the Palestinians with administrative autonomy but not independence or sovereignty.

In contrast, the PLO and the Labor Party also share several goals and oppose the policies of Likud and Hamas. Both accepted in formal written agreements in September 1993 at the White House a peace accord that recognized Israel's right to exist and the Palestinian right to statehood.⁷

While Likud and Labor battle over ideology and politics, Hamas differs with the PLO on issues of religion and it rejects compromise.

Hamas views the PLO as an important organization but much like a "wayward brother." It's stated goal is the creation of an Islamic State in Palestine, one that subjugates not only Jews but Christians and other religions, too.⁸ The PLO has recognized Israel and, like the Labor Party, has accepted the Land-for-Peace principle.

While Hamas views all Israeli politics as identical, its violence has helped to undermine the policies of the Labor Party and have at least twice helped to elect Likud candidates to the office of Prime Minister.

It is this politics of opposition that drives Likud and Hamas to share similar goals.

³ How Israel Misjudges Hamas and its terrorism, Washington Post, Oct. 19, 1997, by Ehud Sprinzak. Commentary Section, Page 1.

⁴ How Israel Misjudges Hamas and its terrorism, Washington Post, Oct. 19, 1997, by Ehud Sprinzak. Commentary Section, Page 1.

⁵ CNN.com, Nov. 12, 2000, www.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/meast/11/12/obit.leahrabin.ap/

⁶ Likud Party platform; Hamas Covenant.

⁷ PLO 1988 declaration; Labor Party Platform.

⁸ Hamas Covenants.

Israel invests in Islamic movement alternative to Arafat

In 1978, Begin sought to undermine Arafat's influence by funding a program of "pacification" to win over the hearts and minds of the Palestinian masses. Years later, Begin would unleash his war-mongering defense minister on Lebanon to finish Arafat.

Over the objections of many Palestinian Islamic leaders including the Commissioner of the Muslim Waqf in the Gaza Strip, Rafat Abu Shaban, Israel registered the newly formed "Islamic Association" which Yassin founded.

Yassin was willing to cooperate with the Likud government because he, too, shared the goal of undermining Arafat's secular influence over the Palestinians. More importantly, and in line with Likud policies, he sought to block the creation of a Palestinian State based on land-for-peace.

Israel's Likud government permitted Yassin to launch a newspaper and to set up charitable fundraising organizations. With funding Yassin raised and with Israeli funds directed through the Village Leagues, the Islamic Association built new mosques, new schools, hospitals and medical clinics. The group established social service and humanitarian agencies and even job creation venues. Despite its later turn to armed struggle and suicide bombings, Hamas meticulously directed nearly 95 percent of the funds it raised to these worthy humanitarian projects.⁹

Yassin's followers won significant influence over the Village Leagues system, another Israeli supported scheme intended to undermine the PLO's influence and strengthen the hand of "local leaders" that Likud believed could be co-opted politically.

Yassin was not initially involved with violence. Most of the violence was directed either by Arafat's Al-Fatah organization, based in Lebanon, or by the other PLO umbrella partners like the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Inside the occupied territories, another Islamic group called Islamic Jihad was struggling to gain support among Palestinians living under occupation.

The "Islamic Association," was a shadow organization and prodigy of the more radical Moslem Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hasan al-Bana. The group created a Palestinian branch in the 1930s but waged a mainly rhetorical battle against oppression in the Arab World.

Initially, the Moslem Brotherhood and Sheik Yassin's Islamic Association were not supportive of armed struggle against Israel. Yassin adopted the Moslem Brotherhoods approach toward a slow Islamicization of the region.¹⁰

⁹ Jewish Post, April 1996, www.jewishpost.com/jp0203/jpn0303.htm, by Bluma Zuckerbrot-Finkstein.

¹⁰ How Israel Misjudges Hamas and its terrorism, Washington Post, Oct. 19, 1997, by Ehud Sprinzak. Commentary Section, Page 1.

Israel's first initiative: The Village Leagues

Yassin benefited from a system of Israeli controlled "Village Leagues," sometimes called Village Councils. The leagues were a breeding ground for Palestinian collaborators who were blackmailed or bribed into reporting on the activities of other Palestinians. Many of them held positions of leadership in the Village Leagues and were friendly to Israel. ¹¹

The creation of the Village Leagues was Israel's first effort to encourage an alternative to the PLO. ¹²

The Israeli military gave the League members protection and widespread powers. As many as 200 of the league members were given weapons training by Israel. Israel's Shin Bet recruited paid informers from this network and Israeli sources estimated the number of informants were in the thousands. ¹³

Israel Military Government employed as many as 19,000 Palestinians, with 11,000 of them working as teachers, clerks and administrators.¹⁴

As secret talks with Labor Party leaders advanced, Arafat ordered his loyalists to force Village League members to resign in 1988 sparking violence between Hamas and Arafat's Al-Fatah supporters. The gap between Hamas and Al-Fatah widened when Al-Fatah commemorated the 20th anniversary of the March 21, 1968 battle of Karameh.

Karameh was a village in Jordan at the border with the West Bank that consisted mainly of Palestinian refugees. There, Arafat and his Al-Fatah faction set up headquarters and directed their armed struggle against Israel.

Israeli troops invaded Karameh but confronted fierce resistance from the Arafat-led guerrilla defenders. It was particularly important because of the humiliation Arabs shared for the defeat to Israel in June 1967. The battle successes added to Arafat's growing charisma among Palestinians.

During the commemoration, Palestinian leaders of the Village Leagues began their mass resignations. The Palestinian Mayor of Beitunia, Abdallah Rezaq, was the first to dissolve his municipality's council. ¹⁵

Yassin uses Israel's support and turns to armed struggle

¹¹ 3 killed on West Bank 2 others die of wounds as tension in territories rises, By Timothy M. Phelps, Newsday Middle East Bureau, Jerusalem, Feb. 8, 1988.

¹² Beit Sahur Man dies in Bethlehem prison, By Jon Immanuel, The Jerusalem Post, Jan. 19, 1997, Page 3.

¹³ Lynching signals harsher measure Palestinians cracking down on collaborators, By Dan Fisher, Los Angeles Times, Feb. 27, 1988. Page 6.

¹⁴ Lynching signals harsher measure Palestinians cracking down on collaborators, By Dan Fisher, Los Angeles Times, Feb. 27, 1988. Page 6.

¹⁵ Palestinians pressured to cut ties, By Mary Curtius, Boston Globe, March 22, 1988, page 3.

In 1987, with secret funding from the Village Leagues some of whose members had even allegedly received Mossad military training, Yassin established a military arm of the Islamic Association that he called Hamas.¹⁶

The acronym Hamas comes from the Arabic name, the Islamic Resistance Movement (*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya*). In English, the word Hamas translates into "zeal." It is appropriate to Yassin's goals. The Moslem Brotherhood and its sister organizations pursued a policy of gradual Islamicization of the Arab World and Palestine. It was a policy that Hamas rejected as being too slow.

There is a real irony in the transformation of Yassin's organization from a benevolent religious foundation to a guerrilla movement. Begin and Shamir had both headed the first two terrorist organizations to operate in Palestine during the 1940s. Shamir had led the Stern Gang while Begin led the larger Irgun Zvi Leuhmi. The two groups worked in tandem and were responsible for introduction of terrorist techniques into Palestine including car bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, hijackings of military vehicles and the lynching of British soldiers in the olive groves outside of Jerusalem. They were responsible for the near destruction of the car-bombed King David Hotel and for the massacre of civilians at the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin near Jerusalem.

Shamir understood perfectly what his efforts had created. Knesset Member Avraham Poraz (Shinui) was among a litany of Israeli leaders who blamed Likud for Hamas. "The Likud has got Hamas on its hands because it refused to talk to the PLO," he said.¹⁷

Yassin turned to armed struggle against Israel's occupation in January 1988. Soon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad were in competition to see who could disrupt the occupation and take control of the Palestinians in anticipation of the return of Arafat.

Islamic Jihad distributed a leaflet claiming responsibility for the killing of restaurateur, Ya'acov Shalom, in Jerusalem's Ein Kerem neighborhood on May 20, and a fatal bomb attack in the Mahane Yehuda market the week before. It also labeled Jordan's King Hussein, a Hamas backer, as a "butcher," an apparent reference to his suppression of unrest in Palestinian refugee camps following another attack at Rishon Lezion, an Israeli settlement outside of Tel Aviv.¹⁸

But the real rivalry for Hamas was with Arafat's Al-Fatah loyalist.

During the 1990s and the first Intifadah, Hamas enforced business closures and boycotts as a means of protesting Israeli policies, but also as a means of remaining closer to the population. These were done to counter PLO political positions and to undermine the PLO's efforts to assume leadership from abroad. For example, in January 1990, Arafat deputy Abu Iyad publicly complained that Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel was undermining the peace

¹⁶ Hamas: Scourge and Symbol, by Martin Regg Cohn, The Toronto Star, Oct. 13, 1997. Page 2.

¹⁷ Milo: Killers to be Killed, By Asher Wallfish, The Jerusalem Post, December 20, 1990, Page 02.

¹⁸ Settler retaliation reported; stone-thrower gets two years, By Joel Greenberg and Matthew Sseriphs, Jerusalem Post. June 7, 1990, page: 12.

process because new immigrants went directly to settlements, and settlements were created to accommodate this immigration. In response, Hamas issued an order closing all businesses in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to protest Soviet Jewish immigration, not simply to join in the protest but to also counter the efforts of the PLO to lead from abroad. ¹⁹

This transformation came as a surprise to Shamir, who ordered the arrest of Hamas political leader Dr. Abdel Aziz Rantisi. In 1989, he ordered a full scale crackdown on Hamas and the arrest of Sheikh Yassin. ²⁰

But the crackdown was too little too late. By February 1990, Israeli officials estimated that Hamas enjoyed solid backing during the Intifadah from 30 percent of the residents of the Gaza Strip where it was based. ²¹ This increased popularity only hastened Arafat's decision to accept a compromise with Israel in the hopes of returning and taking charge.

As he tried to undermine Hamas, Labor Party members of Shamir's "shared government" succeeded in pushing Israel to participate in peace talks with the Palestinians and Jordanians in Cairo. Shamir tried to reduce the role of the PLO by insisting on vetoing the appointment of the Faisal al-Husseini, an Arafat confidant and the PLO's Jerusalem representative, to lead the the Palestinian delegation. ²²

Arafat continually tried to control Hamas, partly to demonstrate his authority and partly to show his Labor Party partners that he could deliver. But offers of compromise and alliance from PLO officials were consistently rejected by Hamas leaders who remain dedicated to hardline, Islamicist ideology.

As peace talks between Israel and Arafat were being explored, Hamas increased its violence, in part to thwart the peace process. When Hussein and other PLO officials denounced the murder of Jewish tourists in Egypt in February 1990, Hamas countered by sending vehicles with loudspeakers through the streets of major Palestinian cities praising the attacks and denouncing the PLO for its criticism. ²³

The Likud desire to undermine Arafat remained strong even after Hamas had been declared a "terrorist organization" and the Labor peace initiative with Arafat was at its height. In the months after the White House peace signing, some leaders of the Israel's security forces pursued contacts with Hamas leaders who were in Israeli jails in the hopes of getting them to embrace peace at the expense of Arafat's leadership. The Israelis wanted to use Hamas as a means of pressuring Arafat into making more concessions. ²⁴

¹⁹ Soviet Aliya and the Arabs, Editorial, Monday, January 29, 1990, Page: 04.

²⁰ Jerusalem Post, Jan. 4, 1990, page 10.

²¹ Peace steps could spark Gaza War between PLO and Hamas Backers, by Ben Lynfield, Jerusalem Post, Feb. 15, 1990, Page 2.

²² "Israel determined to bar Hussein from Cairo Talks, By David Makovsky, Jerusalem Post, Jan. 22, 1990, Page 1.

²³ Local Arab Leaders Condemn Attack, Hamas Hails Killings, By David Rudge and Joel Greenberg, Jerusalem-Post, Tuesday, February 6, 1990, Page: 10.

²⁴ Hamas Origins, By Steve-Rodan, THE-JERUSALEM-POST. December 24, 1993, Page: 14

Arab regimes flipflop on Hamas

As peace moved forward, the Arab World also shifted from supporting the Islamic militant movement to opposing it.

The Muslim Brotherhood and later Hamas enjoyed the backing, for example, of King Hussein of Jordan and several other Arab government leaders not just during its rise, but even years later.

In Jan. 1991, the new Jordanian Government included members of the Moslem Brotherhood, insuring that Jordanian funds would continue to Hamas.

In a show of how important King Hussein viewed the religious organization, King Hussein pressured Israel to release Yassin from his Israeli prison in 1997. It was a price demanded by the monarch for his freeing of Israeli Mossad agents who were arrested after bungling the attempted assassination of a Hamas leader in Jordan.

After his release, Yassin devoted his energies to repairing damage to Hamas' educational and charitable institutions inflicted during the 1996 crackdown against the movement.

Like many Arab leaders who viewed Arafat as a threat, King Hussein was willing to live with Hamas militancy as a counter-balance to Arafat. Like Israel, Jordan viewed Hamas as a natural rival to Arafat's leadership. Despite his public rhetoric, the Jordanian Monarch could never forgive Arafat for his efforts to destabilize his government. Half of Jordan's population consisted of Palestinians, most of them refugees from the 1948 and the 1967 Arab-Israeli wars.

Even after Hamas engaged Israel militarily and it was denounced by Israelis as a terrorist organization, Arab governments embraced Hamas over Arafat. Arafat's support of Iraq's Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War did much to secure continued Hamas aid from Kuwait. Hamas had issued a statement denouncing Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, likening it to the occupation of the Palestinians. That endeared Hamas to Kuwait. Arab Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia continued to channel funds both to its military operations and to its charitable foundations and social service agencies.

In an incident which Arab leaders reportedly sought to suppress, Arafat himself was confronted with the rising influence of Hamas at the 1990 Baghdad summit, when he demanded to know why Kuwait had paid less than one-eighth of the money it had promised the PLO. The emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jabber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, produced a set of figures showing that Kuwait had indeed honored its pledge, but that the bulk of the funds had gone to Hamas rather than to the PLO.²⁵

As the Rabin-Arafat peace process moved forward, Arab government support for Hamas waned. Hamas sought support elsewhere, turning to Iran.

²⁵ PLO Braces for Israeli Strike, Threatens Soviet Immigrants, By Douglas Davis, Jerusalem Post, Friday, June 8, 1990, Page: 02.

In August 1999, Jordan closed the group's political bureau, arrested its leaders and prohibited Hamas from operating out of Jordan. ²⁶

This split reflected the change in Hamas under the peace accords, with Hamas activists focused on sustaining and surviving the charitable and social agency services in the West Bank (notably Tulkarm) and in Gaza, while the military wing was now based in Damascus, Syria and in part in Amman, Jordan.

Still, the network that Shamir and the Likud helped create for Hamas preserved its funding resources. Even after breaking with Jordan and other Arab countries, sources estimated the Hamas budget at between \$40-70 million a year.

The peace process teeters on the brink of Hamas attacks

In early April 1990, Palestine National Council Chairman Sheikh Abdel Hamid a-Sayeh invited Hamas to join a committee preparing the next Palestine National Council meeting. (The PNC was the umbrella group that included representatives of most Palestinian organizations and mainly the PLO.) Hamas circulated a memorandum in the territories on April 6, 1990 setting for the conditions the PLO would have to meet: Hamas would only join the Palestine National Council if the PLO withdrew its "acceptance of partition," rejects territorial concessions, and refuses to recognize Israel. The statement also demanded that Hamas be given up to 50 percent of the PNC seats, and a modification of the Palestinian National Covenant "in accordance with the faith of the Moslem Palestinian people and its glorious heritage." ²⁷

Even President Clinton recognized the ability of Hamas to disrupt the peace process he helped launch and he sought to undermine Hamas and strengthen Arafat. On January 24, 1995, Clinton signed an Executive Order prohibiting transactions with Hamas due to their potential for disrupting the Middle East peace process. This included all of Hamas' subgroups including the Izzedin Al-Qassem Brigades. Even with the change in attitudes of the Arab governments, pressure from the Clinton Administration and a reversal in Israel's policies toward Yassin, the road to undermining Hamas' extensive funding network was difficult. ²⁸

Eventually, Hamas was forced to consider compromise with Arafat to survive. By 1998, Yassin publicly broke from the Hamas Charter and participated at a meeting of the PNC. His presence prevented the PNA from declaring Palestinian statehood, but it brought a harsh rebuke from the Hamas leadership outside of the territories. Hamas political head Khaled Meshal and treasurer

²⁶ Patterns of Global Terrorism, US Dept. of State, April 2001.

²⁷ Hamas's Militant Stand on Joining the PNC, By Joel Greenberg, Friday, April 13, 1990, Page: 16.

²⁸ Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, June 1999. www.meib.org.

Musa Abu Marzook, both in Jordan, and Hamas' Damascus representative Imad Alami all urged Yassin to resign. ²⁹

Support for Hamas has declined considerably as the peace process moved ahead. Prior to the peace process, support among the Palestinians for Hamas was estimated by the Israelis at 20-40 percent in the West Bank and 60-80 percent in the Gaza Strip. This fell to 15-25 percent during the peace process. ³⁰

And undermining the peace process has always been the real target of Hamas and has played into the political ambitions of the Likud. Continued Hamas suicide bombings and violence has played a significant role in undermining and bringing the peace process to a grinding halt, and set the stage for Sharon's election over Labor Party leader Ehud Barak in 2001.

As peace falters Hamas influence rises

As the peace accords lumbered ahead, Hamas stepped up its terrorist suicide attacks. About a dozen suicide bombings were attempted in the months after the PLO-Israeli accord was signed at the White House in September, 1993. ³¹

Initially, the peace process persisted in the face of these heinous terrorist attacks. But it couldn't stand the pressure of the gut-wrenching images of suicide bomb attacks. In February and March 1996, Hamas launched a series of suicide bombings in retaliation for the Israeli assassination of alleged Hamas bomb-maker Yahya Aiyash the month prior. These attacks contributed mightily to bringing down the Peres government and helped return the Likud back to power electing the more hardline but silver-tongued young Turk, Benjamin Netanyahu.

The wave of deadly Hamas bombings took 60 Israeli lives in eight days, prompting Arafat to clamp down on Hamas even more — some 1,000 Palestinians were arrested and Arafat's Palestinian National Authority government, established under Labor, even ousted Hamas from some of its mosques. The suicide attacks continued through 1997 giving Netanyahu public support to halt the peace process and reverse agreements made by the murdered Rabin.

Netanyahu ignored Arafat's efforts to crackdown on Hamas and the peace process came to a grinding halt.

Similarly, Hamas suicide bombings during the Barak administration coupled with the failure to reach a peace accord on President Clinton's timetable, and Sharon's provocative incursion to the "Temple Mount" on September 28th, 2000 provoked the second Intifadah.

Although the Israelis insist that second Intifadah was responsible for a wave of Israeli killings, during the first week of the conflict, 50 Palestinians had

²⁹ Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, June 1999. www.meib.org.

³⁰ Jewish Post, www.jewishpost.com/jp0203/jpn0303.htm, by Bluma Zuckerbrot-Finkelstein, April 1996.

³¹ Hamas Origins, By Steve-Rodan, THE-JERUSALEM-POST. December 24, 1993, Page: 14.

been killed and five Israelis had died. Among the dead were nine Palestinian protesters whose deaths sparked the Intifadah's start. The Israeli response was repressive and heightened Palestinian response. And, when two Israeli reservists (suspected of being undercover government assassins) were captured and murdered viciously in Ramallah on October 12th, 2000, the slide to total Palestinian-Israeli conflict was already set in stone.

Barak declared his decision to resign to give himself a 60-day window before elections to control the conflict and authorized secret meetings at Taba where Palestinian and Israeli negotiators desperately tried to reach an accord.

But, it was too late, Sharon had achieved his objectives. Sharon did not need a major Hamas suicide bombing to win his election against Barak. The Sharon inspired Intifadah and the violence it caused on both sides swung Israeli voters to the hard right, giving him a landslide victory against Barak on Feb. 7, 2001.

Clearly recognizing that their violent strategy was bringing down the Arafat government, halting the peace process and playing into the emotions of the Palestinians, Hamas launched another wave of suicide bombings in the week after Sharon's election. Sharon used these attacks as the pretext to launch a massive invasion of PNA controlled areas of the West Bank and decimating Arafat's government infrastructure.

Hamas terrorism played into the rage and the frustrations of the Palestinian people, who helplessly watched as the promise of peace evaporated before their eyes. They had never tasted its fruits but only heard its empty promises. They were a people on the edge and easy victims for Sharon's political manipulations.

The conflict continues its escalation. The number of Palestinian and Israeli dead continues to climb. The terrorist attacks on September 11th by madman Osama Bin Laden in the name of Islam only served to further build a barrier that prevents reasonable people to achieve a peace.

And, once again, the real benefactor of the violence and conflict is Israel's right wing Likud Bloc and its new leader, Ariel Sharon, the man that his fanatic supporters affectionately call "Bulldozer." ³²

OTHER SOURCES ³³

³² (Israeli Elections, The Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer, www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june01/israel_election.html.)

³³ Hamas was born during the last intifada.

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