



THE MAKING OF A PALESTINIAN ISLAMIST LEADER

AN INTERVIEW WITH KHALID MISHAL: PART I

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Khalid Mishal (Abu Walid), a founder of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and the head of its politbureau since 1996, has been the recognized head of the movement since the assassination of Shaykh Ahmad Yasin in spring 2004. Despite his considerable influence within the organization, at least dating back to the early 1990s, Mishal did not attract attention in the West until he survived Israel's botched assassination attempt in Amman in September 1997, which made headlines when King Hussein (with possible help from U.S. President Bill Clinton) compelled Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to provide the antidote to the poison with which he had been injected in broad daylight by Mossad agents disguised as Canadian tourists. Mishal's prominence has only increased following the Hamas victory in the January 2006 legislative elections in the occupied territories. Despite the U.S.-led campaign to isolate the Islamist movement internationally, Mishal has functioned as the main interlocutor with regional and international actors seeking direct or informal contact with the organization, as well as with the international media.

Since Hamas's "external leadership" was expelled from Jordan in August 1999 following the ascension of King Abdallah II, Mishal has been based in Damascus. I met him there several times in 2006 and 2007 in my then-capacity as senior Middle East analyst with the International Crisis Group, and I had been impressed by his willingness to engage in substantive discussion to a degree rare among political leaders (of whatever nationality). He seemed less interested in convincing his listeners that he was right than in presenting his views as clearly as possible, leaving it to them to draw their own conclusions. More than once questions were posed that one would expect him to dodge or dismiss, or at least rebut, but consistently he answered them head on.

Despite his straightforward and accessible manner, and although he agreed from the outset to a formal interview, it was not easy to arrange. Because of last-minute scheduling conflicts and unexpected changes in his plans, two earlier interview attempts were aborted or cut short, the second

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when he had suddenly to travel abroad to deal with the diplomatic crisis that resulted from the Gaza border breach in late January. (A high point of one of these visits was that the driver sent to fetch me at my hotel turned out to be a longtime Mishal bodyguard who had helped foil the 1997 assassination attempt by grabbing the Mossad agents responsible after a lengthy chase through the streets of Amman. Though he still took obvious pride in his achievement, he did point out that if the attempt had been made in a country other than Jordan—which had signed a peace treaty with Israel only a few years before—Mossad would not have hesitated to use guns, and the outcome might have been very different.)

The assassination on 14 February 2008 in broad daylight of Hizballah's former intelligence and external operations chief Imad Mughniyah on a visit to Damascus—an assassination whose precision and execution could only bring home to Mishal his own vulnerability—threatened another delay, but in fact our interview went ahead on 8–9 March. That the Mughniyah assassination did have an impact, however, was clear from the heightened security measures of this visit compared to previous ones. The interview began at 9:30 at night as opposed to the planned afternoon hour, and though I do not know Damascus well enough to know where I was taken, the drive to the same office in the same leafy suburb took twice as long on account of what seemed to be deliberate detours. I was searched more thoroughly than on previous occasions and with procedures resembling those at a U.S. airport under Code Red security alert. Also in contrast to previous encounters, my cigarettes were not returned despite my repeated requests. Fortunately, Mishal—who despite his personal aversion to the habit had never previously prevented guests from smoking—arranged for their swift return when coffee was served.

As on earlier occasions, Mishal was highly personable, presenting his views and thoughts in the logical, systematic manner befitting a man who was trained as a physicist. Though by no means devoid of humor, he does not pepper his conversation with jokes and laughter the way Yasir Arafat, for example, used to do. Interestingly, although I had been asked to submit a list of topics to his office beforehand, this seemed to be for purposes of perusal rather than vetting, as it elicited no comments or restrictions. I had, however, avoided as a waste of time asking him about the one issue I knew from others that he was not prepared to discuss seriously whether on or off the record: namely, differences and tensions within Hamas. What I was particularly interested in exploring, since I had seen so little of it in his previous interviews, was his personal background and political history. He turned out to be willing to do so in some detail, providing insights into his political formation and the founding of Hamas, and, in the process, an interesting window on the Palestinian community in Kuwait during the 1970s and 1980s. Part II—which will appear in JPS 148—will focus on the Islamist movement's more recent experiences and political strategy, particularly after Arafat's death in November 2004.

What is striking about Mishal is that while he is as close as one gets to the heart and soul of the Hamas movement, it's easy to imagine in his presence that one is speaking not with an Islamist leader of the 21st century, but with a leader of Fatah in the 1970s or the PFLP in the 1980s. As a colleague who spent some time with him once noted, his exegesis in discussion is Palestinian nationalist rather than Quranic. Though like other Islamists he scrupulously avoids the term "imperialism" (apparently seen as a leftist marker), he repeatedly insisted over the next three or four hours that Islamism and nationalism are complementary rather than contradictory. It bears mentioning that not so long ago other Islamists were denouncing nationalism as the scourge of the umma. This was also the first time I heard a Hamas leader use the term "Palestinian revolution."

Few who have met Khalid Mishal question his leadership qualities. A senior Arab official with decades of experience came away particularly impressed with his "willingness to learn," which he noted was rare indeed for those at Mishal's level. The question, rather, is whether time, circumstances, and Mossad's learning curve will conspire with or against what seems to be his ambition to lead the Palestinian national movement. No less important is the question of whether Mishal's brand of militant pragmatism will continue to hold sway within the Hamas leadership, or whether the combination of conflict, siege, and isolation—or a successful second attempt by Mossad—will bequeath to us a different Palestinian Islamist movement or movements, with a very different kind of leadership.

I want to begin by asking about your personal background. You were born in the village of Silwad, in the West Bank, but were raised in Kuwait. Kuwait was known as one of the main bastions of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Fatah, during the 1970s and 1980s, yet you became a member of the Islamic movement. How did this come about?

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. As you said, I was born in Silwad, near Ramallah, in 1956. I lived there until 1967, when I was 11 years old, having completed the fifth grade in Silwad Elementary School. After 1967 and the defeat, I, like hundreds of thousands of our people, experienced a new exile.

You were in the West Bank during the 1967 War?

In the West Bank, of course. The war occurred while I was in Silwad. I lived through this experience as an 11-year-old whose memory was fully awake. I can still remember the war and how it affected people and their morale, how suddenly things changed from expectations of victory and liberation (under the influence of the Arab media, which unfortunately gave false accounts of developments on the ground) to the shock of the entire [Arab] nation [*umma*] being defeated in just a few days and losing yet more land. In addition to what we had lost in 1948, we had now lost the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. So this of course left a deep impression on

me, my mind, my heart, my being, my thought, and without question influenced the subsequent course of my life.

My father had been in Kuwait since 1957, where he worked both in agriculture (he was, of course, a *fallab*) and as an *imam* in a mosque, based on his religious background and culture and memorization of a very large part of the Quran. My father, by the way, had participated in the 1936 Rebellion with 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni and that generation. So because my father was in Kuwait, our family followed. We went to Jordan immediately after the war, and after a month or two, during the summer of 1967, we continued on to Kuwait.

Given your father's background, could one say that you were raised in a more religious environment than your peers and schoolmates?

Yes. First of all, my village, Silwad, is well known for its religiosity. It is a small place, but it had a number of *ulema* who were graduates of al-Azhar University in Cairo—we had about six al-Azhar graduates. In addition to the village's generally religious climate, religiosity and conservatism tend to reign in rural Palestine as a whole. So this was my environment and the environment of those around me. I was, thank God, raised in an atmosphere of religion, morality, conservatism, and commitment. I did not experience lost or wayward years in my youth, but was committed to prayer and religiosity from a young age.

I would think your arrival in Kuwait at such a young age would add to the shock of the war.

Of course. In reality 1967 was a collection of shocks: of defeat; of forced exile from one's own country; of having to adapt to an entirely new environment at a stage of your life when you are no longer a child oblivious to what is going on around you, but at the same time lacking the adult's knowledge and experience to deal with the situation. The impact was all the greater because we were among tens of thousands of our people who were similarly victims of the defeat and exile and dispersal.

Were most of the Palestinians in Kuwait refugees from 1948 or 1967?

Both. But tens of thousands, like us, had been transformed into refugees that year. When the school year started in September 1967, neither the Kuwaiti government schools nor the few private schools were able to absorb such large numbers. So new schools were established, which were known as PLO schools. These were operated under the supervision of the PLO, followed the Kuwaiti curriculum, and used the premises of the Kuwaiti government schools, but in the evenings. All the pupils and almost all the teachers, except for a few Egyptians, were Palestinian. So that was another influence, studying in such an environment, with your schoolmates all in the same situation, all having come that same year from towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, so that even while we were in Kuwait, when we were at those schools we felt like we were still in our homeland, and Palestine was our collective concern. Therefore this educational environment in my view formed a patriotic environment or cradle, if you like. And when you go to school in the evening, you are made

aware of the particularity of your circumstances, that you are not like other pupils who go to school in the morning.

Also, school began each day with nationalist anthems, which I still remember, like *Biladi Biladi* and similar revolutionary songs. We would begin and end each school day with these anthems, which formed part of a nationalist culture that we absorbed on a daily basis. So when the Palestinian Revolution was launched in 1965 and escalated after 1967, it was part of our environment. I remember, for example, that after the Battle of Karameh in March 1968 our teacher stopped class to explain to us the importance of this event. So during this period, from 1967 to 1970–71, my upbringing was a combination of the religious commitment I got from my home and family, and this nationalist, revolutionary environment. Together these are responsible in large part for my character and personality, interests, and thought.

Yet I would imagine that the religious commitment you were brought up with was probably a traditional and non-politicized form of piety, and rather different from what came later in your life. In this context, when and how were you politicized?

The situation I have just described continued until about 1970–71. I then moved to Abdallah al-Salem Secondary School, a [Kuwaiti] government rather than a PLO school, which operated during normal hours. I was a dedicated pupil and always, praise be to God, the top student in my class and school. During this period my interest in religion and religious commitment grew even while my nationalist commitment remained at the same level as before. In fact, my patriotic sentiment was extremely strong, to the extent that during this period, I considered joining the Palestinian armed resistance, particularly when I saw quite a number of my schoolmates leaving Kuwait for Jordan, Syria, or Lebanon for this purpose. It became an almost daily routine at school, where you would ask, “Where is so-and-so?” and the response would be, “He’s left to join the *fida’iyyin*.” Most would join Fatah, others the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine [PFLP] or other organizations, but during this period we didn’t really care too much about such distinctions. The general sentiment was nationalist and inclusive rather than factional. People would be described as having left to join the Palestinian revolution, the *fida’iyyin*, or the resistance rather than a particular organization. These nationalist sentiments gripped all of us and were reinforced by reading Palestinian revolutionary magazines and the like.

But what ultimately trumped my thoughts of joining the resistance at that point was that I asked myself whether I would do better to discontinue my education in order to join the revolution or whether I could better serve the cause, the revolution, and the nation by joining it after I was additionally armed with education. I concluded this assessment with the determination I should remain in school, particularly because I was an outstanding student, though my nationalist commitments did not wane. Meanwhile, in September 1970 civil war had broken out in Jordan, which resulted in the expulsion of the Palestinian resistance from that country and its migration to Lebanon. This no doubt had a negative effect on Palestinian sentiment generally.

After 1970–71, when I was in secondary school and my religious interests continued to grow, I became acquainted with a group of young men and colleagues, Palestinians, some of whom were part of the Palestinian Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of my friendship with them and our common interests and religiosity, and their interest in my participation with them on account of my religiosity and academic record, I joined the Palestinian Islamic movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, in its Kuwaiti exile in 1971.

So you had not been a member of a different organization, such as Fatah, before joining the Islamic movement?

No. Before 1971, I dealt with the Palestinian revolutionary situation as a general one, without any factional commitments or distinctions. Once I joined the Islamic movement in 1971 I retained my existing friendships with those who were members of Fatah, the PFLP, and other organizations, and several years later when I matriculated at Kuwait University in 1974, I continued to make friends from other factions and was invited to join Fatah. I was already a member of the Islamic movement and had my particular view of matters, but some of these friendships continue to this day. We would compete within the General Union of Palestinian Students [GUPS], and sometimes this competition was quite fierce.

After joining the university, my colleagues and I in the Islamic movement, on account of our commitment to the Palestinian national cause in its armed, political, and cultural dimensions, and on account of our religious commitments, began to feel the need for a specifically Palestinian experience. After all, we were a Palestinian Islamic movement, and we therefore concluded that this movement must have a role in the Palestinian struggle in all its dimensions.

So the agenda was one of combining religion and national struggle?

Exactly. The Palestinian Islamic movement, like the Islamic movement throughout the Arab world in the 1960s and early 1970s, was primarily concerned with proselytizing and intellectual and social matters. It was also being continuously repressed and persecuted. This was the period when pan-Arab and leftist thought reigned supreme in the region, and the Islamic movement was removed from direct participation in the struggle. Yet the Muslim Brotherhood had participated in the 1948 war and had been active before that. It also had been involved in the fighting in the Suez Canal Zone and in defending the Gaza Strip in the mid-1950s, and from 1968–70 had the experience of what was known as the “military bases of the shaykhs” [*mu’askarat al-shuyukh*] in Jordan, under the umbrella of Fatah.* So the Brotherhood did have specific experiences, but these ended for a variety of reasons—some, in my assessment,

*During this period, the Brotherhood launched a number of guerrilla raids across the Jordan-Israel border from four bases in the northern Jordan Valley. Fatah lent its name to these bases but otherwise had nothing to do with their operation.—*Ed. note*

were internal, and others related to objective conditions and a hostile regional environment.

Therefore, when our generation came to the Palestinian Islamic movement, it found that the movement did not have any recent direct experience in political activity and armed struggle on the ground. This created the need for us to have our own project, one that fused Islam and nationalism. In this context, our first experience was in GUPS. In 1973 or 1974, before I had entered Kuwait University, those from the movement who were already there had tried to contest the student elections, but the attempt was unsuccessful because of a number of complications. Later, after my colleagues and I analyzed that attempt, we agitated within the movement for renewed participation in this sphere. In 1977 we took a leadership decision to establish a list to run in the GUPS elections at Kuwait University. Every group that ran in GUPS elections did so as a list. Fatah had a list, the PFLP (or the left more broadly) had one, so we established our own list. Its basis was the Palestinian Islamic movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, but we operated under the name of Islamic Justice List [*qa'imat al-baq al-islamiyya*], which I headed. We were supported by a number of independents and other sympathizers who were not Brotherhood members.

This was 1977, when the political debate was very much sharpened by Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, and when our colleagues in Fatah and the PFLP could advertise their role and activities in Lebanon as a genuine experience with a record on the ground. We would engage in exchanges and debates in the university cafeteria, and since I was the head of our list, I was constantly engaged in this give-and-take. Despite the fact that ours was a new list, we made a strong start. Unfortunately, as soon as it was realized that we were a strong contender, the elections were cancelled. It was as if they feared that we would monopolize GUPS, even though we were running for the first time.

Participation in elections and institutions, particularly unions and student organizations, was not part of the political culture of Palestinian Islamic organizations at that time. We had overcome this obstacle and decided to participate, but the elections were suspended and postponed until 1980. Then various demands were made as conditions for our participation, like recognizing this, that, or the other—it reminds me of the conditions which are demanded of us today. We were asked to accept the PLO's 1974 10-point program, for example, and other things I don't remember, but the elections were ultimately further postponed. We waited year in year out, and concluded that there was a prohibition on our participation, even though we were Palestinians to the marrow of our bones and our patriotism was beyond question.

GUPS is not the property of Fatah or the PFLP or any other organization, but a national union for every Palestinian student. But when my colleagues and I came to the conclusion that we were barred from participating in our national union, we had no choice but to transform our electoral list into a league [*rabita*] operating outside GUPS. So we established the Islamic League for Palestinian Students [*al-rabita al-islamiyya li talabat filastin*].

I graduated in 1978, and the Kuwaiti branch of the League was formed in 1980. A U.K. branch had been established a year earlier, in 1979; one was formed in the United States in 1981, and another in Germany in 1981 or 1982.

Did you return to the West Bank for family visits during this period?

Because we were among the tens if not hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who migrated from Palestine immediately after the 1967 war and were therefore not included in the census conducted by the Israelis in September 1967, we were not issued identity cards. We therefore did not have the right to visit our country on the basis of citizenship or residency, but only on the basis of a visitor's permit that could be obtained for us by relatives still there. I was keen to visit, and in 1975, while a university student, I visited Silwad with my family for two months. This was my first and unfortunately only visit after 1967. Since then, my personal circumstances have prevented another such visit on account of my involvement in politics and the national struggle.

During that trip in 1975 I was able to travel extensively in Palestine, touring the country and visiting the cities of the West Bank and the Palestine lost in 1948. I was supposed to go to the Gaza Strip as well, but unfortunately those who were responsible for arranging this part of my journey were unable to do so. We went to Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque, to Nablus, Jenin, and so on, to Nazareth, Haifa, Jaffa, and the Palestinian coast, but after the Gaza part of the journey did not materialize we returned to the West Bank.

These travels deepened my consciousness. Despite being a source of joy, they also caused me deep pain. I was 19 at the time, so my mental and emotional faculties were already fully developed. When I returned to Silwad I was very affected emotionally, particularly because this was only a temporary return and I would be leaving again. The visit accentuated my feeling of exile from the homeland, where I had spent the first eleven years of my life. I was also very affected by my travels in the part of Palestine we had lost in 1948, which I had not visited before. When I saw areas like Marj ibn Amer and the Palestinian coast in all its beauty, I became aware of the extent of our loss, first in 1948 and then in 1967. This, too, deepened my feelings for the homeland.

Did you have any interaction with Israeli society or the military authorities?

I wouldn't call it interaction. During the two months I was there I went through checkpoints and saw Israeli soldiers and other Israelis, and passed by settlements, but there was no real interaction because I didn't live there. I wasn't, for example, called in for interrogation. I was a 19-year-old visiting from abroad, my political affiliation was unknown, and there was no information about me. Of course we went through the searches and so on when crossing the bridge between Jordan and the West Bank, but the experience for me was of witnessing my country under occupation. You're coming to your own country as if you're a stranger or visitor with no right to stay, whereas hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of Israelis came from all over the world to live in

Palestine that doesn't belong to them. So this contradiction was painful, and of course I felt it, especially as I had already been involved in the Palestinian Islamic movement since 1971.

While at the university, during those fertile years from 1974 to 1978, I developed further in terms of my interests and commitment to Islam, the Islamic movement, and the nation—interests and commitments that I combined. Those were fertile years, from 1974 to 1978. Besides politics and religion, I also developed my interests in poetry, culture, and literature. I also always liked science and had a particular love for physics, in which I specialized. All these things came together to form my character and personality.

Kuwait during this period had one of the largest margins of freedom available in the Arab world. It had a Palestinian population of 300,000–400,000, most of whom lived in contiguous neighborhoods. You're living in Kuwait, but within Kuwait you're in an environment that is almost entirely Palestinian. The Palestinian Revolution is there, Fatah and the other organizations are there, there is a PLO office. There is constant interaction with the Palestinian cause in a relatively open environment.

Kuwait was one of the states that actively supported the Palestinian cause. Fatah was established in Kuwait, and God willed that Kuwait would also be one of the cradles in which Hamas was born. At the university, my colleagues and I searched for the template to propel the experience of the Palestinian Islamic movement forward, so as not to remain mired in our past, and advance it into genuine participation in the Palestinian national struggle on the ground. The Palestinian Islamic movement has always been a nationalist movement, but we were in search of a new experience different from what there was in the past. So this combination of elements—the freedom of Kuwait, the Palestinian presence, the experience of the different factions, the university (which is always an advanced environment in all countries)—all came together to produce the idea of establishing our *jibadi* project in Palestine appropriate to the existing circumstances.

So there is a direct line from our electoral Islamic Justice List in 1977 to the Islamic League of Palestinian Students in 1980 to the activities that my brothers and I undertook after we graduated to lay the foundations of Hamas. It wasn't called Hamas at that time, but our objective was to create a Palestinian *jibadi* project in the land of Palestine, in all its Islamic, national, political, and armed dimensions.

You remained in Kuwait after you graduated from university?

Yes, I remained and worked as a teacher for six years, from 1978 to 1984. I taught physics at the intermediate and secondary levels in the Kuwaiti school system. At the same time I remained active politically in the Palestinian Islamic movement in Kuwait, where we had begun thinking about how to launch our project. At the same time, things were happening in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as well. We can therefore say that the Hamas project, which is the *jibadi* political project of the Palestinian Islamic movement, developed during the

late 1970s and early 1980s in three main arenas: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and Kuwait. And I thank God that I was one of those who participated in the establishment of this movement.

Those who participated in founding this movement operated, in equal measure, in the Gaza Strip—first and foremost was Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, God rest his soul; in the West Bank, including some whom have died, some who have been martyred, and others who are still alive; and in exile. We are part of a single Palestinian Islamic organization and movement, which is present in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and in exile, with each working to advance the project in his own arena. We were in contact with each other as part of a single movement.

Are those who were with you in the movement in Kuwait at that time still active in Hamas, or have they moved on?

I should first clarify that not all of those who were in the movement in Kuwait in the early days were students at Kuwait University. But to answer your question, in general, some of those brothers who were early members have returned to the homeland, some are engaged in different activities, and some have remained visibly active in the movement. Others continue to operate underground. Among those with public roles are Jamal Issa, the Hamas representative in Yemen; Munir Said, who has been our representative in both Sudan and Yemen; Muhammad Nazzal, a member of the Hamas politbureau who lived in Kuwait but studied in Pakistan; Izzat Rishq, another politbureau member who studied at Kuwait University; Sami Khatir, also a politbureau member; Usama Hamdan, Hamas's senior representative in Lebanon; and Dr. Muhammad Siam, who worked in Kuwait as a teacher and who for a period was acting president of the Islamic University in Gaza. These are the most prominent ones, but there are of course others who have visible roles.

You stopped teaching in 1984. Did you leave Kuwait then as well?

No. In 1983 the Palestinian Islamic movement convened an internal, closed conference in an Arab state, which need not be identified by name, to conduct consultations and examine how best to initiate our project. It included delegates from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and exile, and it was an important milestone because it laid the foundation stone for the creation of Hamas. During this period I remained in Kuwait. I was part of the leadership of this project from its inception, and after 1984 I devoted myself to it on a full-time basis. That is why I stopped teaching that year.

The uprising erupted in December 1987, and not long afterwards Hamas was established.

It is true that the existence of Hamas was publically proclaimed in December 1987, after the intifada broke out, but to be accurate, Hamas was formed some time before. The project was effectively launched in 1983 at the conference I mentioned, after which operational groups were established in the West Bank,

the Gaza Strip, and in exile. In 1985–86 we decided on the organizational form and leadership of this movement comprising both the homeland and exile. In 1986 we took the formal decision to launch the project, formed its leadership, and finalized our plans, programs, and objectives.

Therefore it already existed. What happened is that after the events of 7–9 December 1987 [that unleashed the uprising], the leadership in the Gaza Strip convened and concluded that these Zionist crimes presented an opportunity to rally the Palestinian masses against the enemy. And the popular confrontation that was later termed the intifada began. So when the Islamic movement became involved in this direct confrontation with the Zionist enemy, which began with stones and escalated into knives, Molotov cocktails, and rifles, it did so under the name of Hamas. The first Hamas communiqué was issued on 14 December 1987, days after the uprising began. This was an announcement of the birth rather than the date of birth, which had taken place some time earlier.

At these conferences held before the uprising, did you have the opportunity to meet with movement leaders such as Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, Jamal Mansur, and so on?

No. We of course met those who came from inside, but Shaykh Ahmad Yasin was not among them because he was imprisoned in 1984, and even after his release he was prevented from travelling abroad—in fact the first time he was allowed out was after Israel tried to assassinate me in Jordan. Shaykh Yasin was arrested after the movement's first military initiative, over which he presided, since in addition to his outstanding role in proselytizing, mobilization, developing contacts with the Islamic movement in 1948 Palestine, and as an institution builder (he built, for example, the Islamic Association and Islamic University), he also took an early interest in the military dimension in his capacity as the head of the Gaza organization. As far as our contacts with the Gaza branch of the movement, the members of the organization who traveled abroad and whom we met periodically were not among its more recognizable names. Communication and coordination among the three arenas was never a problem. We are a single movement, and aside from messages brought by travelers there was telephone contact and letters.

How would you characterize Hamas? Is it essentially a religious or a political movement? And how does it differ from other Palestinian political movements?

Hamas can be characterized as a comprehensive movement. It is an Islamic movement, a nationalist movement, a militant movement, a political movement—in addition to its cultural and social dimensions, its service functions, and its institution building. So you cannot say that Hamas is only a religious, or only a political, or only a military, or only a religious and social movement. It is not, for example, just an armed wing or a political party. It is all of these things. It is a fusion of all these dimensions.

In terms of how it differs from other factions—all of which we respect—each has its particular experience, history, character, conditions under which it emerged, and Hamas is no different. We overlap with others in some respects and differ from them in others. But the most important distinction is that Hamas encompasses all these various dimensions that I mentioned.

Yet Fatah, for example, was known to have a strong Islamic faction within it.

Correct. During its formative period you could even say that the Islamic current (and especially the Brotherhood) was the strongest current, but afterwards Fatah opened its doors to Ba'athists, pan-Arabists, and various other currents, and the point of intersection of the various trends within Fatah became the rifle. Its idea and identity became the rifle, armed resistance to the occupation, irrespective of ideological or intellectual or cultural affiliation.

What Hamas brought to the Palestinian arena was the Islamic, religious dimension. Equally important, it introduced this dimension to the battle without its being at the expense of the nationalist dimension, because there is no contradiction between the two. The Islamic movement is a nationalist movement.

But can this be the case in a society characterized by religious diversity?

Yes, of course, because ultimately the overwhelming majority of our society is Muslim, so it's not an issue. It's as natural as having Christian parties in European Christian countries.

The other aspect is that being an Islamic movement in Palestine or the Arab world does not mean you are opposed to the Palestinian or Arab Christian, or even to the liberal or secular Palestinian or Arab. To the contrary, we are taught to reinforce the culture of coexistence, dialogue, cooperation, of give-and-take, and to avoid fanaticism, whether in religion, thought, or affiliation. A distinctive feature of the Arab world, and particularly Palestine, is tolerance, and Palestine since the Arab conquest has always been a model for religious coexistence between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. So there is no contradiction between being an Islamic movement in Palestine, where most of the population is Muslim, and having good relations with all sectors of society, including the Christians, who are a part of our society and our partners in the nation. The proof is that Hamas since its establishment has gained the sympathy of Christians as well as Muslims. Many Christians, perhaps even most, voted for us in the 2006 legislative elections.

So the distinguishing characteristic of Hamas, besides its comprehensive nature, is that it introduced the religious dimension into the battle. And I think it was unnatural for religion to be distant from the field of battle.

That's your life story.

Yes, but it is also part of the Palestinian tradition. Izzeddin al-Qassam—who of course was of Syrian origin—was a religious shaykh. Yet he is the greatest Palestinian symbol of struggle and militancy, and we named our armed wing after him. His religiosity and piety and religious learning were not obstacles to

his participation in the national struggle—on the contrary, they helped produce it. ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, although not a shaykh or religious scholar, never saw a contradiction between his Islamic identity and his national Palestinian identity. This was the case throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Then came the pan-Arabist and leftist currents, with their own ideas and experiences that I don’t want to discuss now.

In any case, for religion to be distant from the field of battle either because of external pressures against the religious current or because of shortcomings within the Islamic movement itself is something we consider unnatural. The natural state of things is for it to be on the front line. First of all, because we are operating in an Arab-Islamic environment, where religion naturally occupies a central place. And second, because religion in itself is fundamental to the battle. It increases strength and steadfastness, the capacity of the fighter, provides him with faith and helps mobilize him. It fortifies him against pressures, against Israelization and hostile cultural invasions. So for religion to be introduced into the battle is not an instrumentalization of religion, but rather something natural.

To be Muslim and Arab or Palestinian is complementary rather than contradictory. People should be at peace with their civilization and culture affiliation, with their roots and history.

So what Hamas did was to help return things to their natural order, but without attacking others for not being Islamist or not being Muslim. We provided a model—which is another distinction of our movement—even while continuing to respect others whether they are religious or not. We may disagree with them, but I respect their experience and their right to choose. There is no compulsion in such matters.

It should be emphasized that Hamas did not invent the resistance—not at all, because others preceded us. But we built on these efforts and in so doing deepened the path of resistance. We came to the Palestinian resistance at a time when it was experiencing great difficulties, particularly after the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the dispersal of the Resistance among various countries. The Palestinian Revolution was under siege within the homeland as well as in exile. Hamas emerged on the scene during the first intifada and since then has provided a new impetus to the path and choice of resistance, which had been targeted and suffered important setbacks throughout the 1980s.

What are Hamas’s objectives?

Hamas’s Islamic, nationalist, *jibadi*, and political project was launched to end the Zionist occupation; to liberate the land and the holy places; to reclaim Palestinian rights; to secure the return the refugees to their nation, lands, and homes; and to reclaim Jerusalem. These are the national Palestinian objectives of Hamas.

And the construction of an Islamic state?

Look. Hamas’s priority today is liberating the nation, expelling the occupation, ending Palestinian suffering, and achieving the right of genuine self-determination on the land. These are the priorities today, which intersect with

those of all our partners in the Palestinian arena, whether Fatah, the PFLP or the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Islamic Jihad, or any other independent faction, as well as the Palestinian elites and masses inside and outside.

Our current priority is not to determine the nature of the state we will establish. I don't want to repeat the mistake made by the PLO, which began discussing statehood without possessing sovereignty, without control over any of the land, and so on. The state that was declared in Algiers in 1988 existed only in the air, as a political expression to boost morale. Similarly, some are discussing a state today even though they possess no sovereignty on the ground. The Palestine Authority's prerogatives are confined to autonomy [*sultat bukm dbati*] without sovereignty.

For these reasons we do not favor discussing the nature of the state at the present time. Once the occupation is ended and sovereignty on the ground is achieved, the state will be established, and in that phase, collectively, as Palestinians, we will discuss and determine the state's identity in keeping with the rules of democracy. We do not, and will not, compel people to accept anything. First, because we don't have the right to do so, and second, because it is not in our nature to do so. There is democracy and the ballot box, which will produce a majority that, acting in partnership with others, will determine the identity of this state through proper constitutional institutions according to procedures observed in any other state in Asia, Africa, Europe, or the Americas. At this point it is enough to say that any state should be governed through reconciliation with its own people, its nation, its roots, and its civilization. It should be a state that is open to the world, far from fanaticism, and one that promotes tolerance and accepts all.

Some would respond that while this may be the view of Khalid Mishal, other Hamas leaders, including those in the occupied territories and particularly the Gaza Strip, who operate in a highly conservative environment and have been isolated from the outside world for decades, have an entirely different view.

Look. I hear such talk as well. But that is a description of some symptoms rather than of the essence of things. The views I am expressing are not the ideas of Khalid Mishal but the principles of Hamas. Certainly Hamas is a very large movement, and within it you can find a range of voices and concepts—this is part of our diversity. Nevertheless, the views I am expressing are those that have been formally adopted by the organization, its leadership, and its institutions, and it is by these positions that we should be judged. Have mistakes and excesses been committed here and there? Yes, of course, as occurs in any large movement whose membership includes fringes on the extreme left and right. But what I described above is the fundamental, official position of Hamas.

Still, some account should be taken of extreme pressures on the ground in terms of the Israeli occupation and military incursions, not to mention the economic boycott and siege, combined with the deprivation of rights—to the

point that the will of the people as expressed in democratic elections has been rejected, with attempts made to overturn the electoral results. Such a situation can occasionally push people to give priority to self-preservation. Such a situation can produce errors and excesses. But this is a reaction, an attempt at self-defense in the face of attack. Oppression and abuse always produce counter-reactions, which can be extreme and which we do not desire. What we want is to reinforce the culture of tolerance and centrism [*wasatiyya*]. In point of fact, the guiding principle that we as a Palestinian Islamic movement have adopted since our foundation until today is centrism, not fanaticism or extremism. Our political and religious culture is centrism. This does not mean that we do not have people who on occasion act beyond these principles, but these are individual cases. And sometimes it is the environment of constant pressure that produces such incidents. Our desire as a movement is that the Palestinian arena be one of freedom, of peaceful transfers of authority, of respect for the rules of democracy and the results of elections, and of prohibiting anyone from exercising dictatorship or imposing foreign intervention upon us.