**Fatah’s Policy Against the Challenge Posed by Hamas to the Organization and the Palestinian Authority**

**The First Intifada Era**

Until the outbreak of the First Intifada in December 1987, the alternative represented by the Muslim Brothers did not pose a significant threat to the PLO’s hegemony in the Palestinian street. The organizations established during the 1970s under Sheikh Ahmed Yassin’s leadership, with Al-Jami'a Al-Islamiyya (Islamic Association) and al-Mujma' al-Islami (Islamic Center) at the forefront, focused more on religious and social activities (da'wah) than on political issues. The PLO and its dominant wing, Fatah, which set the political tone, criticized the Islamic movement for not doing enough to promote the Palestinian national vision.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, the sword of the armed struggle against Israel in the years leading up to the outbreak of the intifada was wielded by other organizations, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).[[2]](#footnote-2)

With the onset of the Intifada, Sheikh Yassin, recognizing the emerging new reality, decided to institutionalize this organizational activity as a political and military force, named Hamas (an acronym for Harakat al-Moqawmah al-Islamiah, meaning the Islamic Resistance Movement). In essence, this movement competed with the operations of the United National Leadership (UNL), which unified several Palestinian organizations under the PLO authority’s in order to dictate the course of uprisings and other acts of resistance. Hamas operated in parallel to the UNL, employing similar methods, encouraging protests, and disseminating inspirational propaganda through leaflets, sometimes incorporating rival and provocative messages against UNL policies.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the first year of the Intifada, the conflict between the PLO and Hamas was mainly ideological and declarative, with each side emphasizing its own role and worldview in their efforts to gain Palestinian society’s support. However, throughout this year, there were also a number of symbolic acts or intentional physical harm directed against Hamas members by the PLO. For example, during a demonstration in June 1988 in Jabalia (the Gaza Strip), Hamas supporters burned pictures of Arafat. On another occasion, Hamas planned a violent procession to ambush PLO members upon their release from prison, but it was called off at the last moment. Despite these ongoing tensions and conflicts, a full-blown confrontation did not erupt at this time. The PLO recognized that it was facing a rising force, which, in their view, received support even from external agents. According to the PLO, Israel turned a blind eye to Hamas’s activities in order to allow it to strengthen to the point that the Palestinian streets would be awash in a fratricidal war. The PLO also gathered evidence that even Jordan, under King Hussein’s leadership, supported and stood by Hamas.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In light of these circumstances, the PLO began to take steps to mitigate the perceived threat from Hamas. Its activities encompassed three central strategies. The first involved the PLO trying to exert influence through external agents, primarily the Muslim Brotherhood, the parent movement of Hamas.[[5]](#footnote-5) Sheikh Yassin and his associates were in contact with the movement’s leaders overseas to seek their blessing and guidance for the burgeoning activities of the Hamas movement. In response, Arafat’s associates reached out to religious and political leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, seeking their help in moderating Hamas activities, but their efforts were fruitless.

Similar appeals to the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, however, were met with a positive response, and the latter even took practical steps. These included recognizing the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian struggle and mobilizing funds and volunteers for the organization. The Hamas leadership had to consider this policy of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership in Egypt, which slightly diminished the intensity of the confrontations with the PLO. It is worth noting that Arafat’s attempt to “chase” after Hamas raised concerns among his leftist allies, including the communists, who expected Arafat to lead the resistance against Hamas and feared that he might abandon their alliance in favor of cooperation with Hamas.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The second strategy involved efforts to make direct contact with Hamas. For example, upon his release from an Israeli prison in 1988, Faisal Husseini, a Fatah leader, entered into discussions with Islamic entities in Jerusalem to formulate a cooperation plan.[[7]](#footnote-7) From the summer of 1988, political discussions began taking shape between the Palestinians and Israel. These contacts were revealed when a plan of Faisal Husseini for establishing a Palestinian state in the territories of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, with an exiled government, became known.

In May 1989, the Israeli government presented a plan for an agreement under which elections would be held among the Palestinian population. Its results would determine a mutually agreed upon leadership with which Israel could enter into negotiations about a settlement. Not surprisingly, Hamas, which envisions the establishment of an Islamic state in all the Palestinian territories, vehemently opposed these moves. Arafat recognized that he had to include Hamas in any agreed-upon plan, understanding that its exclusion would pose a formidable obstacle to any progress achieved. However, he was disinclined to allow Hamas to participate in the elections, fearing their potential victory.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Therefore, Arafat sought to incorporate Hamas under Fatah’s umbrella, or at least under the unified leadership of the Intifada. In this context, Fatah and Hamas officials met several times around 1991, but all their discussions ended without success. Arafat, seeing Hamas’s growing public support, sought recognition for himself and Fatah as the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people. This process culminated in Arafat’s agreeing to join the Jordanian delegation at the Madrid Conference in October 1991, effectively eliminating any possibility of reaching agreements with Hamas.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Fatah’s third strategy involved public opposition to Hamas and its activities. For example, Fatah’s unified national command’s Proclamation No. 25 in September 1988 specifically addresses Hamas. Amid Hama’s call for a general strike on August 21, not coordinated with Fatah’s command,[[10]](#footnote-10) Hamas was depicted as trying to impose its will and agenda on the Palestinian public, thereby inciting controversy and division in the struggle, which would ultimately serve Israeli interests. However, Fatah’s proclamation left the door open for Hamas to join the general effort and lauded imams in mosques who encouraged the public to participate in Intifada activities, attesting to Fatah’s nuanced approach to Hamas while isolating it from the Islamic aspect of the struggle.[[11]](#footnote-11) Additionally, in a proclamation published in November 1988, following Fatah's declaration of the establishment of a Palestinian state, Fatah criticized Hamas and urged “fundamentalist elements” to unite forces and cease acting for their personal interests, and instead join the national effort led by Fatah.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At that juncture, however, Fatah lacked both any governmental authority and the means ability to impose its power on Hamas. Thus, Fatah had a clear deficiency in its ability to restrain Hamas, perceived as a reckless agent, even if, theoretically, it wanted, to do so. It is evident that in the absence of any agreement, Fatah’s desire to restrain Hamas stemmed solely from internal reasons, primarily the fear that Hamas, which was concurrently under pressure from Israel, might supersede Fatah, which was also severely beaten by Israel at this time. This situation illustrates that the gap between Fatah’s policy and capability was not so great.

**The Madrid and Oslo Peace Talks Era**

On October 30, the Madrid Conference began, a landmark event in the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict. The conference, sponsored by the United States and Russia, included representatives from Israel, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan, with the Palestinian representatives incorporated into the Jordanian delegation to avoid any official direct negotiations between Israel and Fatah. The conference gave the green light to holding bilateral talks in Washington between Israeli delegations and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese delegation. Concurrently, secret talks began between Israeli representatives and Fatah representatives in Oslo in December 1992. These talks ultimately culminated in the public signing of the Oslo Accords in the summer of 1993 on the White House lawn.

Parallel to these developments, the PLO was working to gain formal control over the Palestinian population and territory by intensifying its negotiations with Israel. Behind the scenes, the PLO used Hamas as a bargaining chip to pressure Israel in negotiations. As early as the first meeting of the Israeli representatives with Abu Ala in December 1992, Abu Ala warned about “the danger of losing time and that the moderate elements in the Palestinian camp may lose their control to the benefit of Hamas.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

According to the notes of the Israeli representatives after the first round of talks, “it was clear that the PLO felt pressure, unable to accept the fact that it did not play a role in the bilateral and multilateral talks, and fearing that it might lose its status to Hamas. An arrangement with Israel in which the PLO-Tunis played an important role, and in general, setting foot in Gaza, could have been a lifeline.”

On February 17, 1993, Faisal Husseini described to Pundak the escalating tension in the West Bank and Gaza between supporters of the PLO and the peace process, and supporters of Hamas s and opponents of the peace process. While Husseini reported that the situation was become increasingly acute, he also stressed that at this stage, the PLO and the peace process supporters were prevailing.[[14]](#footnote-14) In his opinion, “the response to the opponents is an Israeli-Palestinian agreement that does not present its supporters as weak.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Before the meeting at the end of April 1993, Beilin testified that “the Palestinians clearly felt that time was working against them, and they feared Hamas’s growing strength.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

At the same time, the PLO recognized that it needed to assist in resolving the issue of the Marj al-Zahour deportees in order to gain public legitimacy. Following the December 1992 kidnapping and murder of an Israeli policeman (after his kidnappers’ demand for the release of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin from Israeli prison), Israeli deported more than 400 terrorists, most of them Hamas terror operatives, to Lebanon. Lebanon refused them entry, leaving them stranded in a makeshift camp called Marj al-Zahour. Israel’s aim in deporting them was to weaken Hamas and facilitate negotiations with the PLO.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Already at the outset of the Oslo talks in January 1993, PLO representative Abu Ala, gave a pre-prepared speech insisting that “the first step… should be an immediate solution to the problem of Hamas deportees.” The PLO suggested that, in addition, older deportees and PLO supporters, especially individuals whose presence in the territories would assist the peace process, such as Mohammed Dahlan, Akram Haniyeh, Marwan Barghouti, and Jibril Rajoub,[[18]](#footnote-18) should also be returned. Beilin noted that the PLO proposed the return of others in addition to the Hamas deportees to ensure that: “the celebration would not only be that of the extremists.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Again, at a meeting on February 10, 1993, Abu Ala stated that the PLO “reject[s] the way of Hamas and even see[s] it as a deviation from Islamic tradition, but at the same time, totally reject the way in which the Rabin government, which adopted a policy of deportation, acted.”[[20]](#footnote-20) According to Abu Ala, the deportations had inadvertently strengthened Hamas and stalled the political process. The Rabin government, he maintained, had not punished Hamas, but had done them a great favor.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Although Pundak dismissed Abu Ala’s comments about the deportees and the call for their immediate return as “national lip service,”[[22]](#footnote-22) in the next meeting on March 20, 1993, Abu Ala brought up the subject again, claiming that along with Israel’s persistent use of force in the territories, “ the second issue is the problem of the deportees. The Palestinian delegation will not be able to participate in the bilateral talks without an agreement on the issue of the deportees to Lebanon.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Even during the signing of the Declaration of Principles, the PLO maintained this stance.

When Beilin first met with Arafat after the signing of the Declaration of Principles in September 1993, Arafat asked him for help in releasing Sheikh Ahmed Yassin from prison, feeling that this would consolidate his status as the leader of all Palestinians.[[24]](#footnote-24) In reality, by in December 1993, the Hamas deportees returned from Lebanon with a much higher public recognition and support, thereby strengthening Hamas.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Even during the Oslo talks, it was evident that the PLO was continuing with its ambiguous policy towards Hamas. On the one hand, the PLO recognized the threat posed by Hamas was a threat and needed to be undermined. On the other, the PLO also aided and strengthened Hamas, portraying itself as the defender of the interests of all Palestinians in order to secure public support. This ambiguous approach reflected the PLO’s desire to weaken Hamas, fearing its rising power, while simultaneously aiding it to gain public support as the liberator of prisoners from Lebanon.

**After the Establishment of the Palestinian Authority**

Following the new reality after the 1993 Declaration of Principles, and the decision to establish a Palestinian Authority led by the PLO, implemented in June 1994, Hamas became subject to greater scrutiny. It seemed that Hamas wanted to have it both ways: it wanted to oppose an agreement with Israel or any recognition of its legitimacy, while maintaining a degree of legitimacy with the Palestinian Authority and its institutions – all this without relinquishing its ultimate goal of establishing a Palestinian state, from sea to river, based on Islamic principles. Arafat’s statements, justifying the agreement as a temporary measure based on Islamic sources, reinforced Hamas’s position.[[26]](#footnote-26)

However, Hamas’s 1988 charter already rejects this approach, stating that: “There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals, and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This stance was put into practice as Hamas’s attacks escalated from 1992–1993 and throughout the 1990s, with the organization carrying out numerous terror attacks that killed hundreds of Israelis and injured thousands.

The PLO’s strategy at the time was characterized by the same delicate balance. On the one hand, Arafat, as leader of the PLO, aimed to weaken Hamas in order to order to bring it into the fold of the Palestinian Authority from a position of weakness. If Hamas would acknowledge its inability to combat the PLO, it might be more inclined to join this crumbling and fading entity. On the other hand, Arafat sought to retain as much public support for himset and the agreement as possible, and he understood that the way to do this was by including Hamas in the dialogue. Therefore, joint meetings were held between the sides, including on consensus issues such as the issue of prisoners in Israeli prisons.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The most important issue, which offers insights into the PLO’s approach towards Hamas, involved the Hamas’s continuation of terrorist activity after the signing of the Oslo Agreement. The Declaration of Principles agreement was indeed signed without any explicit commitment from Arafat to stop terror, especially not that perpetrated by Hamas. However, the Cairo Agreement of May 1994 explicitly stated that the Palestinian side would take all necessary measures to prevent such actions directed against settlements and military facilities. Arafat’s response to Hamas’s attacks reflects his nuanced approach.

Despite the Oslo Accords, terrorist attacks, many of which were orchestrated by Hamas, continued and even intensified to suicide attacks, with dozens of Israeli civilians killed in each incident. According to several senior officials Israeli security officials, Arafat did little, if anything, to prevent Hamas’s attacks in the years following the Oslo Accords: some even suggest he wanted and encouraged them.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Avi Dichter, later the head of the Israeli Shin Bet, described a meeting he attended in early 1995, where Prime Minister Rabin conveyed to the Palestinian security leaders – there with Arafat’s blessing – that to become a state, they could not permit other elements to operate alongside the government.This was a clear reference to the PLO allowing Hamas’s parallel operations.[[30]](#footnote-30)

After Israeli security forces discovered that the “Engineer,” Yahya Ayyash, responsible for many suicide bombings, had escaped to the Gaza Strip, Carmi Gillon, then head of the Shin Bet, claimed that Ayyash was under his control. This was based on the belief that now that someone – Arafat – was committed to curbing Hamas, he would enforce order in the West Bank and Gaza. However, Arafat claimed innocence, insisting he had no idea what was being discussed and that to the best of his knowledge, Ayyash was in Sudan. Even when Rabin personally confronted Arafat at the Erez Crossing, threatening that if Arafat did not arrest Ayyash, Israel would back out of the agreement, Arafat continued denying that Ayyash was in Gaza, insisting that he was in Sudan.[[31]](#footnote-31) The same situation occurred with Mohammed Cheif, whose presence in the Gaza Strip was confirmed by Israel and communicated to Mohammed Dahlan, head of the PLO’s executive security. However, but nothing was done with the information.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Arafat’s apparent reluctance to take assertive action against Hamas led to a climate of mistrust; even when Arafat apparently sincerely wanted to help Israel in the fight against Hamas, his words were received with great suspicion in Israel. Thus, after the abduction of the soldier Nachshon Waxman in October 1994, Israel believed Waxman was in the Gaza Strip and asked for Arafat’s assistance in the search. Despite the involvement of Arafat and his security teams, and Arafat’s assurance after two days that Waxman was not in Gaza, Israel did not find him credible. It took longer for Israel to understand that Arafat was right and Waxman had indeed been relocated to Bir Naballah in the West Bank.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The Palestinian Authority began to actively counteract Hamas’s terrorist activities only after the devastating suicide bombings in February–March 1996, when Israel informed Arafat that if he did not act against terror, he would not get control of Hebron, as stipulated in their agreements. This led to approximately 400 arrests, which had a significant short-term effect. However, some suggested that these arrests were only a temporary measure to placate Israel, merely calming the atmosphere for a while in order to please the Israeli side, and did not represent a shift in policy. Ultimately, when Israeli interests were at stake, the PLO’s security mechanisms fell short, not because they could not deliver, but because they did not want to enough, and they did not receive adequate support from Arafat.[[34]](#footnote-34) Conversely, Arafat did take decisive action against Hamas when his rule was threatened, as evidenced by the killing of approximately twenty Hamas members by Arafat’s security forces at a demonstration held after Arafat's entry into Jericho in July 1994 following the Cairo Agreement.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Even after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the PLO, under Arafat’s leadership, continued its equivocal policy towards the ongoing threat from Hamas. The Authority progressively developed the ability to suppress Hamas, but this power was exercised selectively. It seems that Arafat’s approach towards Hamas was dictated primarily by what would best help him secure concessions from Israel, and only secondly by the need to maintain legitimacy among the Palestinian populace, especially after entering into a political agreement with Israel. Arafat’s policy towards Hamas varied greatly, oscillating between complete inaction and even passive assistance in evading Israeli security forces, and arresting Hamas members, even if for a limited period, when it suited the Authority’s interests.

1. Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *Time of Hamas*, (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2008), pp. 42–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On PIJ activity until the First Intifada, see Erik Skare, *A History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Faith, Awareness, and Revolution in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 11–100. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mishal and Sela, *Time of Hamas*, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ze’ev Schiff and Ehud Ya’ari, *Intifada* (Jerusalem: Schocken Press, 1990), pp.237–238. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the relations of Hamas with the Muslim Brotherhood see “Hamas Covenant 1988: The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement,” August 18, 1988, Article two [Translated from Arabic]. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Schiff and Ya’ari, *Intifada*, pp. 238–239. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Schiff and Ya’ari*, Intifada*, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anat Kurz, *Islamic Terrorism and Israel: Hizballah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas* (Jerusalem: Papyrus, 1993), pp. 187–189. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), pp. 37–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Hamas Leaflet No. 28, 18 August 1988 [Arabic]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. United National Command Leaflet No. 25, September 6, 1988 [Arabic]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. United National Command Leaflet No. 29, November 1992, 1988 [Arabic]. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Yossi Beilin, *Touching Peace* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 1997), p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ron Pundak, *Secret Channel: Oslo, The Full Story* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2013), p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pundak, *Secret Channel*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Beilin, *Touching Peace*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the deportation of Mahmoud al-Zahar, see: Elad Ben-Dror, “We Were Getting Close to God, Not Deportees,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 74, No. 3, pp. 399–416. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Pundak, *Secret Channel*, pp. 94–95 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Pundak, *Secret Channel*, pp. 94–95 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pundak, *Secret Channel*, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Pundak, *Secret Channel*, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Pundak, *Secret Channel*, pp.153–154. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Shilon, *The Left’s Badge*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Minna Saarnivaara, “From Terrorists to Celebrities: Deportation as a Political Opportunity for Palestinian Islamic Hamas,” *Studia Orientalia*, 114 (2013), pp. 257–276. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Mishal and Sela, *Time of* *Hamas*, p. 109–110. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hamas Covenant 1988, Article thirteen. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Mishal and Sela, *Time of* *Hamas*, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Testimony of Major General (ret.) Amos Gilad in Shimon Sheffer, *The Alarm: Conversations with Major General (ret.) Amos Gilad* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Books, 2019), pp. 60, 76, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Testimony of Avi Dichter in Dror Moreh*, The Gatekeepers* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Books, 2014), pp. 115–116. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Testimony of Carmi Gillon in Moreh, The Gatekeepers, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Carmi Gillon, *Shin Bet between the Cracks*, (Tel Aviv, Yediot Books, 2000), p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Gillon, Shin Bet, pp. 217–218. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Testimonies of Ami Ayalon, Avi Dichter, and Yuval Kisken in Moreh, *The Gatekeepers*, pp. 210–209, 225–224. It should be noted that Ayalon gives greater weight to the PLO’s activities against Hamas at that time, but he also testifies that the motivation for this, as testified to him by the heads of the PLO's security mechanisms, was purely of Palestinian interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Testimony of Carmi Gillon in Moreh, *The Gatekeepers*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)