

Palestine Question and Islamic Movement: The Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) Roots of Hamas

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The top leadership of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) in the Gaza Strip held an emergency meeting on the evening of Wednesday 9 December 1987 to deliberate what to do a day after the Palestinian uprising (Intifada) erupted. The eruption was ignited by the cold-blooded murder of several Palestinian laborers at the hands of an Israeli army trailer driver. The seven men, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, Dr. 'Abd Al-'Aziz Al-Rantisi, Salah Shihadah, 'Abd Al-Fattah Dukhan, Muhammad Sham'ah, Ibrahim Al-Yazuri and 'Isa Al-Nashar, took the historic decision to transform the Ikhwan organization in Palestine into a resistance movement that was called Harakat al-Muqawamah Al-Islamiyah (The Islamic Resistance Movement) known from then on by the acronym HAMAS.

Although the decision was triggered by the unplanned simultaneous popular uprising, Sheikh Yassin and his comrades had been preparing for that eventuality for many years. They had for too long been detached from the earlier history of the movement when it was best known for putting up the most credible resistance to the Zionists who founded the Jewish state on land taken from the Palestinians by force in 1948.

Intended to be a comprehensive reform movement, the Ikhwan was originally Egyptian but has since its inception grown into a global network. The mother organization was founded by Hassan Al-Banna (1906-1949) in the Egyptian town of Al-Isma'iliyah in 1928 where he taught at a primary school not far from the headquarters of the British occupation troops' garrison. Combining elements of spirituality acquired from his association with the Hasafiyah Sufi order with the pristine monotheistic teachings of Islam learned inside the Salafi school of Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) – a disciple and close associate of Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), Al-Banna's project had a great popular appeal. Soon after its birth, the Ikhwan movement grew rapidly within Egypt and beyond it. Inside Egypt, it had four branches in 1929, 15 in 1932, 300 by 1938 and more than 2000 in 1948. By 1945, it had half a million active members in Egypt alone. Between 1946 and 1948, Ikhwan branches were opened in Palestine, Sudan, Iraq and Syria.

Al-Banna's movement's long-term goals were: first, to free the Islamic homeland from all foreign authority; and second, to establish an Islamic state within the liberated Islamic homeland. But neither objective could be achieved without first attending to the more immediate needs of society. His project was, above all, an endeavor to 'rehabilitate' the Ummah starting with the individual, then the family and ending up with society as a whole through a process of gradual reform.

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These two same goals have been pursued, using the same methodology of gradual reform, by Ikhwan offshoots across the Arab region including Palestine where the Palestinian Ikhwan took root immediately after the end of the Second World War. Having initially opened a few local branches in Gaza, the edifice of the movement neared completion with the official inauguration on 6 May 1946 of its Central Office in Jerusalem in the presence of local dignitaries as well as guests who arrived from Cairo to represent the mother movement in Egypt.

The Palestinian nakbah (catastrophe),¹⁾ which shattered the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, dealt a semi-fatal blow to the Ikhwan. In the aftermath of the creation of the State of Israel on nearly two thirds of British Mandate Palestine, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip became distinct and separate geographical units. An armistice concluded in 1949 between the newly founded State of Israel and its Arab neighboring countries placed the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, under Jordanian Hashemite rule while the Gaza Strip was put under Egyptian military administration. The West Bank was eventually annexed to Jordan in 1950 and Jordanian citizenship was extended to its Palestinian inhabitants. The new reality led, inevitably, to the split of the Palestinian Ikhwan into two separate bodies: one in Gaza, under Egyptian military rule, and the other in the West Bank, under Jordanian Hashemite rule. The West Bank Ikhwan soon joined the Jordanian Ikhwan organization.

In the Gaza Strip, Palestinian Ikhwan activists suffered the fate of their comrades in Egypt despite having remained organizationally separate. When, in the mid-fifties and then in mid-sixties, Nassir cracked down on the Ikhwan of Egypt and executed several of their leaders, Gaza witnessed a heavy suppression of Islamic activities and the arrest of individuals suspected of affiliation to the organization. Many Ikhwan members were compelled to leave the Strip for other parts of the Arab world, the Gulf States in particular, in search for a safe haven and a source of income. When the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war erupted the Palestinian Ikhwan was in its weakest and least popular moments. The war, which shamed the Arabs and signaled the beginning of the downfall of Arab nationalism and the rise of Islamism, won Israel territories, including the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Sinai and the Golan Heights, that were several times its original size.

Throughout the decade that followed war, the Ikhwan across the Arab world found themselves reaping the fruits of what was seen as the scandalous failure of Arab nationalism. The release of long-held Ikhwan leaders and members from Egyptian prisons following the death of Nassir in 1970 provided the Ikhwan with an edge over other organizations that competed with them in recruiting new members in a climate made favorable by an Islamic resurgence triggered primarily by the 1967 defeat.²⁾ In Palestine, young men, from as young as early teens, flooded the ranks of the Ikhwan

1) When Israel was created in 1948 two thirds of the Palestinians were expelled from their homes; they have since been living in refugee camps or elsewhere in the "Diaspora." However, round 156,000 remained in what had become "The State of Israel" constituting around 17 per cent of the total population of the newly founded state. To the Arabs these Palestinians, who in 2002 had grown to about 1.23 million, are known as "1948 Palestinians" while to the Israelis they are known as "Israeli Arabs."

2) Of the Islamic organizations that were quite active at the time, that is apart from the Ikhwan: Tablighi Jama'at, an apolitical group that originated in India; Hizb Al-Tahrir Al-Islami, a fundamentally political group that originated in Palestine in the fifties with the objective of restoring the Caliphate; and several Salafi trends that mostly, but not exclusively, had links with Saudi Arabia and that focused primarily on doctrinal and behavioral

with most of the recruits coming from within the student community.

The revival of the Ikhwan in Gaza was brought about by the efforts of a few dedicated men who saw as the greatest threat to their community ignorance and the lack of commitment to Islam. The systematic suppression of Islamic activism under Egypt's rule was to blame and, in their opinion, Israel was the real beneficiary. The inability of the people of Gaza to resist the corrupting policies of the Israeli occupation authorities alarmed these Islamists. Only an Islam-based morality could arm a jobless or penniless Gazan to say no to an Israeli officer offering him or her comfortable life or a good job or a permit to travel abroad for employment or education in exchange for collaborating with the authorities. Israel simply could not control the occupied territories without collaboration from some Palestinians. The Israelis had a clear policy of turning as many Palestinians as possible into informers, into spies against their own people, or at least into beneficiaries from the occupation so that they would do all they can in order to prevent harm from afflicting it. Money, drugs, sex, intimidation and temptation to meet the dire needs of a population under siege were the tools used to recruit or blackmail. The Islamists' long-term project of shielding the people of Gaza against this menace was spearheaded by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin who, despite his physical handicap, became a co-founder and a leader of Hamas since it was born in 1987 and until he was assassinated by an air to surface missile fired from an Israeli war plane as he left the mosque after dawn prayers on 22 March 2004.

Yassin was born in June 1936, less than a year after Sheikh 'Izzaddin Al-Qassam³⁾ led the first armed revolution against foreign occupation troops in Palestine. That year was the year of the Great Strike staged by the Palestinians for six months, from May to October 1936, to protest British pro-Zionist policies.

Ahmad Yassin was no older than twelve years when the nakbah (the Catastrophe) in 1948 forced his mother to carry her children and join the exodus. Palestinians from the village of Al-Jurah (near Ashkelon), as from numerous other villages and towns, embarked on a flight from what they feared was imminent death at the hands of Zionist armed militiamen who were determined to cleanse the land of its Palestinian inhabitants to pave the way for the creation of an exclusively Jewish state in Palestine.⁴⁾

Isma'il Yassin, his father, died when Ahmad was three years old. He was destined to grow up fatherless and homeless in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, a stone's throw away from his home in Al-Jurah where Jewish immigrants from Europe had settled claiming to have returned to the land their ancestors had allegedly left two thousand years earlier. Like hundreds of thousands of other

aspects of Islam but very little on politics.

- 3) 'Izzaddin Al-Qassam was born in the village of Jabalah, near the Syrian port city of Latakia in 1871. In his youth he traveled to Egypt where he studied under Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh. Back home, and working as a teacher at Sultan Ibrahim Mosque, he took part in the 1920 Revolution against the French occupation. He was sentenced to death but fled to Haifa in 1922 where he worked until 1935. Until then, he presided over the local chapter of the Young Muslims Organization. He was killed in November 1935 as he led an armed struggle against the British troops in Palestine. Since then, he has been an emblem of struggle against colonialism across the region.
- 4) Dr. Salman Abu Sitta maintains that 531 Palestinian towns and villages were depopulated by Israel in 1948. <http://www.prc.org.uk/data/asp/D5/495.aspx>

Palestinians the Yassins were made to suffer ostensibly because of an alleged divine covenant given to the Israelis by their god. He would later learn that his country was stolen from his people for purely mundane political reasons; religion had nothing to do with it.

Until his family was forced out of Al-Jurah, Ahmad Yassin enjoyed nothing more than playing on the seashore, no farther than 200 meters away from his home.⁵⁾ He used to observe from the top of a hill nearby the Egyptian and British troops as they moved eastward and westward across Al-Jurah; things extremely dramatic were being anticipated. Soon, the news of Zionist massacring of Palestinians started arriving instilling horror in the hearts and the minds of his village folks.⁶⁾ His family joined other villagers in expressing anger at the Arab armies. They arrived promising to fight against the Zionists and save Palestine and the Palestinians but only managed to strip the people of all weapons alleging that only they could do the job. Their promise was never fulfilled; instead they played a part in incurring the catastrophe.⁷⁾

The pain of homelessness was augmented by poverty. Collecting food handouts from the Egyptian troops stationed in Gaza did help at times, but young Ahmad was compelled to take a year off from his school education from 1949 to 1950 to earn a living out of serving in a restaurant to feed a family of seven. At the age of sixteen in Gaza, and as he was participating in physical exercise, he fell on his back seriously injuring his neck vertebrae. From then on his condition continued to deteriorate until he lost his ability to walk. However, his immobility did not bar him

5) Yassin's Aljazeera Testimony.

6) Early in the morning of April 9, 1948, commandos of the Irgun (headed by Menachem Begin who in 1977 became Israel's Prime Minister) and the Stern Gang (headed by future Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir) attacked Deir Yassin, a village with about 750 Palestinian residents. Over 100 men, women, and children were systematically murdered. Israeli apologists have always claimed that the Arabs had exaggerated the massacres. Al-Dawayima was the site of another massacre perpetrated this time not by militiamen but by Israel's army after the state was founded. On 29 October 1948, as part of an Israeli army operation called Yo'av, 80 to 100 Palestinians, including women and children, were killed by what was described then as "the first wave of conquerors." The Israeli daily *Al ha-Mishmar* described what happened: "The children they killed by breaking their heads with sticks. There was not a house without dead... One commander ordered a sapper to put two old women in a certain house ... and to blow up the house with them. One soldier boasted that he had raped a woman and then shot her..." Another description of the massacre was given by the former Mukhtar (Head) of the village, interviewed in 1948 by the Israeli daily *Hadashot*. "The people fled, and every one they saw in the houses, they shot and killed. They also killed people in the streets. They came and blew up my house, in the presence of eye-witnesses." About 75 old people gathered in the mosque to pray. They were all killed; about thirty-five families were hiding in caves outside al-Dawayima, including some from the previously occupied village of al-Qubayba. When the Israeli forces discovered them, "They told them to come out and get into line and start to walk. And as they started to walk, they were shot by machine guns from two sides... The unit responsible for the massacre was the Eighty-Ninth Battalion, which was part of the Eighth Brigade, commanded by General Yitzchaq Sadeh, the founder of the Palmach. In December 1948, during a general discussion of atrocities by an Israeli ministerial committee, the issue of al-Dawayima was raised. Agriculture Minister Aharon Zisling was probably reacting to a letter he received about the massacre, when he said: "This is something that determines the character of the nation... Jews too have committed Nazi acts." Although he complained that the investigation was not proceeding as it should, he agreed with other ministers that Israel should admit nothing outwardly, in order to preserve its image. See: Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. Institute for Palestine Studies Washington, D.C., 1992.

7) When on May 15, 1948 the last British soldier left Palestine, David Ben Gurion announced the establishment of an independent Jewish State called Israel over two thirds of the land of Mandatory Palestine. In response, Arab armies invaded from five Arab states Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq ostensibly with the aim of helping the Palestinians and preventing the Zionists from turning Palestine into Israel. But in reality they were neither capable nor serious. More than 750,000 Palestinians became homeless.

from pursuing a career in education, a career that put him in direct touch with the people, especially with the young generation.

Having finished his secondary school education in 1957/1958, he worked as a teacher hoping to be able one day to go to university. He almost accomplished his dream when he was accepted in 1964 by the Egyptian 'Ayn Shams University in Cairo. He made a brief visit to Cairo to complete his registration formalities but upon returning home his hopes were dashed away by the Egyptian security services. He was detained in 1965 having been suspected of affiliation to the Ikhwan who had been subjected to more than a decade-long campaign of persecution by the regime of Gamal 'Abd Al-Nassir. After a month of solitary confinement, despite his physical disability, he was released after investigations proved him innocent of the 'crime.' That experience had a lasting impact on him; he grew up to love the Ikhwan, and even join them, and to hate the injustice done to them. He later recalled: "That one-month ordeal deepened my hatred for injustice and taught me that the legitimacy of any authority must be based on justice and on sanctifying the right of a human being to live in dignity and freedom."⁸⁾

A world of difference distinguished the early 1960s from a decade earlier. In the early 1950s joining the Ikhwan was the *a la mode*. The group's bravery and sacrifices during the 1948 struggle to prevent the Zionists from seizing Palestine and turning it into a Jewish state were still vivid in the minds of the people of both Gaza and the West Bank. However, as the Nassirist regime turned against them and started suppressing them from 1954 onwards fewer and fewer people wanted to have anything to do with the Ikhwan. Instead, Arab nationalism was on the rise. Aided by a powerful far reaching Nassirist propaganda machine, Arabism presented itself as a progressive alternative to a decadent and reactionary Ikhwan movement that was blamed for all the ills of the past and the present.

Ahmad Yassin was detained for one month on 18 December 1965 and then banned from entering Egypt. He was, thus, prevented from sitting for his exams at 'Ayn Shams University in Cairo where he was a distant-student at its English Literature Faculty.

By the late sixties there were hardly any distinguished figures with authority or credibility that publicly identified themselves with the Ikhwan in the whole of Palestine. Many such figures had already left to other countries in search of better living conditions or in pursuit of personal safety. Additionally, the Ikhwan had been losing some of their best members to the Palestine National Liberation "Al-Fatah" movement, which was founded in 1957.

It was this hemorrhage of members that prompted leading Palestinian Ikhwan members outside Palestine to organize a meeting in Cairo in 1960 to set up a clandestine Palestinian Ikhwan organization, which encompassed Palestinian Ikhwan members who were not affiliated to the Jordanian Ikhwan organization. The initiative was intended to shield the movement from the threat of Fatah's encroachment on its cadres. The meeting, held in an apartment overlooking the Nile, was attended by 12 students and a senior Palestinian Ikhwan member who had come from the Gulf region where he had been residing. Hani Bsisu, who had been working at Al-Zubayr in Iraq, joined

8) Yassin's Aljazeera Testimony.

the group and was requested to leave for Egypt to head the new organization from there. In Cairo, Bsisu was arrested by the Egyptian authorities as part of the campaign against the Egyptian Ikhwan in 1965 and soon afterwards died in prison.⁹⁾

The ambition of the Al-Fatah leaders at the time was to assimilate the entire Palestinian Ikhwan organization into their newly founded movement. They believed the Ikhwan no longer served any purpose and that such incorporation could provide their nascent project with a major boost at a time when Nassirism was not kind to them either. Kamil Al-Sharif, who had been a leading member of the Ikhwan until the mid-fifties and then joined the Hashemite regime as ambassador and then minister, arrived in Kuwait in 1965 with an offer to the leadership of the Palestinian Ikhwan. He met with Hassan 'Abd Al-Hamid, 'Omar Abu Jbarah, Muhammad Siyam and Ibrahim Ghosheh proposing that the Ikhwan dissolve into Fatah. After deliberation, the Palestinian Ikhwan responded with a conditional acceptance of the offer. They asked that Fatah commit itself to Islamic ideology and adhere to Islamic values. They were told Fatah could not, and would not, make such a commitment.¹⁰⁾

Few people would have predicted that a quadriplegic young man like Ahmad Yassin would live to lead a massive transformation in the lives of the Palestinians not only within the Gaza Strip but throughout Palestine and outside it. Right from the onset he had his eyes set on resisting occupation. But he knew that one could do little resisting if one had neither the stamina nor the organization. As he states in his own 'testimony' he had, for many years, held the belief that resisting occupation required arduous preparations. He was approached in 1965 by the Al-Fatah movement when it launched its struggle against Israel in the hope of embroiling the Arab countries in a war with the Zionist state. He was invited to join but refused insisting that as far as he was concerned the Arab countries were neither ready nor willing to fight. He saw no point in drawing them into a duel that was most certainly going to end in their defeat and subsequently lead to more loss of territory to the Israelis.¹¹⁾ He was soon proven right on a number of occasions. The first was when Fatah mounted an attack from the Gaza Strip on an Israeli bus to the east of Deir Al-Balah. The Egyptian authorities, who were in control of Gaza, responded by arresting and imprisoning those suspected of mounting the attack. Egypt was unwilling to be drawn into a war it knew it could not win. At the time the Egyptian government accused the Ikhwan of seeking to embarrass Egypt and force an internationalization of the Gaza Strip. Although the Ikhwan had nothing to do with the attack the perpetrators had originally been members of the organization; they were recruited by Fatah whose founders, apart from Yassir 'Arafat, had all been former members of the Ikhwan.¹²⁾

9) Source: interview with Ibrahim Ghosheh in Amman 17 August 2003; Ghosheh was one of the 12 students who attended the founding meeting in Cairo.

10) *Ibid.*

11) Yassin's Aljazeera Testimony. Ahmad Yassin reports in his 'testimony' that a friend who lived once in the neighborhood, a Palestinian officer in the Iraqi army by the name of Muhammad al-A'raj, came and invited him to join Fatah. He explained that after a discussion Yassin told al-A'raj: "I object and refuse to work in this manner because it would only embroil the Arab states who are not ready to resist at this stage." Al-A'raj responded by making a prayer that they be embroiled. Yassin responded: "I am not prepared to cause harm to any other Arab country in favor of Israel. This approach will not liberate the land seized by Israel."

12) The former Ikhwan founders of Fatah included Khalil Al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), 'Abd Al-Fattah Al-Humud, Yusuf

The second time Ahmad Yassin was proven right was in the June 1967 war. That was an encounter with Israel the Arab states, including Egypt, did not want and lost miserably. The scepticism expressed by Ahmad Yassin during the days leading up to the war surprised many of his contemporaries. Egypt, in his opinion, was simply not ready for war and Nassir's manoeuvre of ordering the evacuation of UN peacekeepers from Sinai was going to cost him dearly. He could tell from the condition of the Egyptian troops deployed in Gaza that they had not been prepared at all; they were given no specific instruction and had no clear direction. Many of them were reservists called in at a rush and deployed in a hurry. He further feared that Israel might deal a fatal blow to the Egyptian air force leaving the Egyptian army stranded like a lame duck in the Sinai desert.

This is exactly how things turned out to be. Throughout the time the Egyptian troops were being dealt a heavy beating by the Israelis Nassir's propaganda machine claimed that Egypt had the upper hand and was heading toward decisive victory. Eventually, Israeli troops entered Gaza and the West Bank and marched all the way to the Suez Canal and captured the insurmountable Syrian Golan Heights in a matter of six days. The defeat was most shocking to those who had blind faith in the Egyptian leadership; they had been hoping that Palestine would be liberated by the hero of Arab nationalism, Nassir. Only then that many such people recalled with utter dismay the announcement Nassir made a couple of years earlier in an address before the Palestine National Council in Cairo: "If I told you I had a plan to liberate Palestine I'd be lying to you."¹³⁾

After the 1967 war, Sheikh Yassin saw the people of Gaza gradually wake up from their shock only to succumb to the new reality; they seemed to have no option but to accept the status quo. Many of them sought to fulfil their daily needs by doing business with the occupation authority rather than resist it. They felt they had no choice but to go back to their jobs and be paid for them by the new authorities. Sheikh Yassin lamented the condition but understood it: "The people had no food. Day after day they started accepting the reality and decided to go back to their jobs. If only we had a good organization then we would have organized ourselves and boycotted the occupation. But we had no organization, there were no guarantees for the protection of the humans, and the people did not know what to do."¹⁴⁾

He himself had to weigh out his options. He had been teaching before the occupation of Gaza. When it was announced that schools would resume and that teachers should report to work, he asked himself: "Would I be supporting the occupation by teaching or would I be serving my people?"¹⁵⁾ Sheikh Yassin's trepidation stemmed from the fact that the occupation authority was supposed to be boycotted and not served.¹⁶⁾ He decided it was his people he would be serving and therefore decided together with his colleagues to go back to work. It was through his teaching

¹³⁾ Umayrah and Sulayman Hamad. They were soon joined by other Ikhwan members such as: Muhammad Yusuf Al-Najjar, Kamal 'Adwan, Salim Al-Za'nun, Fat'hi Al-Bal'awi, Rafiq al-Nathshah and Salah Khalaf.

13) Yassin's Aljazeera Testimony.

14) *Ibid.* p. 69-70

15) *Ibid.* p. 70.

16) In the aftermath of the June 1967 war, Israel established a military administration to govern the Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Under this arrangement, all aspects of Palestinian life were regulated and often severely restricted.

profession that he managed the project of transforming the Palestinian society in Gaza. Indeed, some of his students grew up to be leaders of the Islamic movement in the Gaza Strip; they were the products of Islamic revival, referred to at times as Islamic resurgence, a process that took hold of society as of the early seventies and was led by Sheikh Yassin.

Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank opened a window of opportunity for the Sheikh to travel across Palestine and communicate his wisdom and knowledge to the forgotten Arabs of Israel, the Palestinians who were allowed to remain within the territories occupied in 1948 and on which Israel was established. Links were also forged with the Palestinians of the West Bank and soon even with the Palestinians in the Diaspora.

However, the most formidable task was to convince an extremely sceptical population about the genuineness of the Ikhwan whose reputation had been tarnished and whose credibility severely damaged by the Egyptian Nassirist media. The people of Palestine wanted to have nothing to do with the group. A combination of propaganda, intimidation and suppression discouraged individuals from any such association. The Ikhwan of the West Bank had even a worst reputation than their brothers in Gaza. The West Bank had been part of Jordan, and therefore under the direct rule of the Hashemites, since Israel was created in 1948. The Ikhwan here seemed to have struck an undeclared pact with the Hashemite regime. While enjoying a legal status they contributed to maintaining the stability of the Jordanian regime by guarding society against unwanted trends that were deemed to have harmful influences including communism, championed then by the Soviet Union, and Arab nationalism, championed then by Egypt's Nassir. While the latter's regime was perceived as patriotic and anti-imperialist many Palestinians saw the Hashemite regime a lackey of the United States and a collaborator with Israel. So, while the Ikhwan of the West Bank had registered offices and functioned openly they had difficulty attracting much popular support or sympathy. Perceived as an autocracy, or an elite club, the 1950's and 1960's West Bank Ikhwan could hardly be identified with the image of the Ikhwan in Egypt during their formative years of the 1930's and 1940's when they were the main force that criticised the regime, defended the poor and the oppressed and spoke against foreign influence and hoisted the banner of liberation from colonialism.

In Gaza, Sheikh Yassin was one of the few people to be publicly identified with the Ikhwan; thus when he led the Friday prayers at the Northern Camp mosque young men in the congregation left and joined other mosques for fear of being accused of sympathy with him or his group.

To be able to do any work the Sheikh needed to reassemble the movement that had been driven underground by years of persecution. In the aftermath of the 1965 Nassirist purge of the Ikhwan, many of the leading figures had either been detained or had already fled Gaza to other Arab countries to escape harassment and be able to lead a dignified and comfortable life. He identified ten Brothers (Ikhwan cadres) from Gaza and Jerusalem and invited them to a meeting to discuss re-launching the Ikhwan. Not all of them were enthusiastic or optimistic; soon afterwards some of them left the territories in pursuit of jobs elsewhere in the 'Arab homeland.'

Nevertheless, the work started and it began in the mosques. Most of those attracted to the

activity were young men, mostly students in their upper teens. This was the generation that grew up into the naksa (1967 defeat) and had been disillusioned with Nassirism and all claims of Arab nationalism. Those who had been brain-washed by Nassir simply continued to idolise him until he died and even beyond.

For a decade or so the movement revived by Sheikh Yassin focused primarily on instilling Islamic values and ethics in the hearts and minds of the young. Unlike the Nassirist authorities in Gaza, Israeli occupation authorities did not mind this seemingly benign religious activity. After all, the Israelis were busy hunting down the nationalist resistance elements that posed an immediate threat to their authority. Sheikh Yassin and his group, which included veteran Ikhwan figures such as 'Abd Al-Fattah Dukhan and Hassan Sham'ah – who were also teachers, had neither the ability nor the willingness at that time to engage in resistance.

Sheikh Yassin felt there was still much more to be done before resistance is mounted. Through lectures in public places as well as lessons at schools he managed to rally around him a core of committed followers from among the high school students who had initially been attracted to Nassirism but deserted it in the aftermath of the June 1967 war. Their initial response to the defeat was to seek solace in religion, which seemed to them the alternative to failed nationalism. The Ikhwan simply provided the vehicle. That very first group of young men to cluster around the Sheikh and seek his guidance included Ibrahim Al-Maqadmah, Isma'il Abu Shanab, 'Abd Al-'Aziz 'Awdah, Fat'hi Al-Shiqaqi and Musa Abu Marzuq.¹⁷⁾ They all ended up studying in Egypt and taking active part in the organization of the Palestinian Islamic student community there. In varying degrees they initiated or took part in the debate about the priorities of the Islamic movement vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue.

Undoubtedly, the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, which led to the loss of the rest of Palestine to the Israelis, was in a number of ways a blessing in disguise. While it did succumb to Israeli occupation, the Gaza Strip had been freed from the oppressive regime of Gamal 'Abd Al-Nassir of Egypt. Furthermore, the Strip became accessible from the West Bank and both areas had become accessible to Israeli citizens of Arab origin who saw this as a 'family reunion' opportunity.¹⁸⁾

What gradually upset the prosperity, which Israeli occupation seemed to bring to the lands occupied in 1967, was the humiliation to which Palestinian workers were subjected; when a Palestinian worker crossed the "Green Line" into Israel, he or she would leave behind their dignity

17) Both 'Abd Al-'Aziz 'Awdah and Fat'hi Al-Shiqaqi (b. 1951) were later expelled from the Ikhwan while studying in Egypt; the first in 1974 for alleged misconduct and the other in 1979 for publishing a booklet praising Khomeini despite a banning order from the leadership of the Ikhwan. The two men joined forces later on to form the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Al-Shiqaqi was assassinated by an Israeli hit squad in Malta on 26 October 1995. Ibrahim Al-Maqadmah (b. 1952) and Isma'il Abu Shanab (b. 1950) became leading Hamas figures in Gaza and were both assassinated by the Israelis the first on 8 March 2003 and the second on 21 August 2003. Musa Abu Marzuq became Hamas first Political Bureau chief and is now the deputy-chief.

18) When Israel was created in 1948 two thirds of the Palestinians were expelled from their homes; they have since been living in refugee camps or elsewhere in the "Diaspora." However, round 156,000 remained in what had become "The State of Israel" constituting around 17 per cent of the total population of the newly founded state. To the Arabs these Palestinians, who in 2002 had grown to about 1.23 million, are known as "1948 Palestinians" while to the Israelis they are known as "Israeli Arabs."

and self-respect. Israeli society needed the laborers but despised them for being ‘the other’ that was ‘different’, ‘sub-human’ and not worthy of respect. At the same time, the mere presence of these workers in their midst provided the Israelis with an agonizing daily reminder of the fact that they were living on the land stolen, no longer than three decades earlier, from the parents or grand parents of these wretched Palestinian workers.

The indignation of the Palestinians and their frustration were fueled by the rise in Palestinian nationalism¹⁹⁾ and by the breeze of Islamic revivalism that had arrived at their doorsteps. Both national and Islamic leaders discouraged Palestinians from ‘cohabiting’ with their oppressors and encouraged, if not resistance, at least boycott. Above all, the Islamic leaders were concerned that workers would inevitably come under the influence of what they saw as the lax and promiscuous Israeli society.

In the meanwhile, however, sporadic resistance activities mounted by members of Palestinian resistance groups, such as Fatah and the PFLP, from within the ‘territories’ or from across the borders were responded to by severe, frequently collective, punitive measures. Israeli occupation authorities would mount crackdown operations and carry out arbitrary arrests particularly against the populations of the refugee camps in both the West Bank and Gaza. While in detention and under interrogation, Palestinians would be subjected to both physical and psychological torture with everlasting scars.

This had been the atmosphere in Palestine when Anwar Al-Sadat shocked the world with his 1977 Jerusalem trip that paved the way for the Camp David accords. These in turn ended in a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt whose leaders signed in the presence of President Jimmy Carter on the White House lawn in Washington D.C. on 17 September 1978. Ironically, that peace was between Egypt, the historical avowed enemy number one in the Arab world of the Zionist state and the first Israeli right-wing Likud government under the leadership of Menachem Begin whose constituency is generally of the view that the borders of the state of Israel should be those alleged to have been bequeathed to the Jews by a divine right extending from the Nile to Euphrates. As peace with Egypt was celebrated, the Palestinian issue was put on a back burner. In the meantime Israel continued to deal one fatal blow after the other to the ‘nationalist’ resistance with the consequence

19) It was primarily the Battle of Al-Karamah, in the Jordan Valley, on 21 March 1968 that reignited Palestinian national fervor and restored confidence and hope among Palestinians worldwide. It was trumpeted as a miraculous win by ill-trained and ill-equipped Palestinian resistance fighters against Israel’s powerful army. However, in time it became apparent that the credit for that victory against the Israelis was due to the Jordanian army units commanded by Mash’hur Hadithah Al-Jazi who ignored orders from the Palace to stop firing at the advancing Israelis. Instead, he seized the opportunity to avenge the 1967 humiliating defeat, or retreat, by the Arab Jordanian Army. The units under Al-Jazi’s command brought delight to the hearts of millions of Arabs. For the first time since the conflict with the Zionists over Palestine started Arab troops charged forward, rather than retreat, battering the Israelis, destroying many of their armored vehicles and forcing them to retreat. The Palestinians believed, and some may still be under the illusion, that it was Al-Fatah under the leadership of Yassir ‘Arafat that accomplished the victory. In fact, the greatest success Yassir ‘Arafat managed to make on the day was to claim the success, attributing it to himself and his guerillas. As a consequence, he was decorated by a number of Arab leaders from Saudi Arabia’s King Faysal to Egypt’s Gamal ‘Abd Al-Nassir and Algeri’s President Boumedienn; he emerged as the leader of Al-Fatah and eventually assumed the chairmanship of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). For more details see the text of testimonies given by Mash’hur Hadithah Al-Jazi and then Ahmad Jibril to Aljazeera “Shahid al-‘asr” programme. The full texts may be found on www.aljazeera.net.

of weakening the factions encompassed by the PLO umbrella.

The coming to power of the Likud government signaled a major change for the people of Gaza.²⁰⁾ It was this government that authorized the building, for the first time, of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, already the world's most densely populated piece of territory.

Apart from the frustration felt by the Palestinians as a result of the neutralization of Egypt in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the people of Gaza in particular seemed to pay the price for that peace-making process. Having withdrawn their troops and settlers from Sinai, the Israelis started deploying more soldiers in the Gaza Strip. Despite the peace with Egypt the Israelis never changed their conscription policy and there was no other place to deploy new conscripts than the occupied territories. Prior to the implementation of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, Israel's borders with Egypt were far away from Gaza. However, in the new era of Israeli-Egyptian peace Gaza had become the border line, and it was there where the border troops were being so massively deployed.

Gradually, the humiliation Palestinian laborers were being subjected to in the Israeli labor market was extended to the residents of Gaza. In a policy initiated by Ariel Sharon, who in 1981 became Israel's Defense Minister in the Likud cabinet of the time, paratroopers – known to the Palestinians as the 'red berets' – were deployed with instructions to intimidate and humiliate Arabs suspected of lending a hand to the resistance. It became a common practice for Israeli troops manning checkpoints inside the Occupied Territories to stop Arab passersby, especially university and high school students ordering them to put their hands up and verbally and physically abusing them for no obvious reason apart from proving who was in charge.

Eventually, Gaza became a huge prison; it was no longer easy for a Gazan to travel to Egypt and soon afterwards inhabitants of the Strip were banned from traveling to Jordan altogether. Israeli restrictions on laborers meant that fewer men and women could earn a living in the lucrative Israeli labor market. One humiliating alternative was to earn a living out of working in the construction of Jewish settlements built on land illegally expropriated from the Arabs themselves. Live was becoming increasingly unbearable and heading toward an explosion.

The list of factors that precipitated the December 1987 Intifada (uprising) is long, but these were not necessarily the factors that led to the emergence of Hamas despite the simultaneity of the two occurrences. The leaders of the Ikhwan in Gaza simply made use of the surge in the frustration and anger of the people of the Strip to bring about the transformation of their organization into a resistance movement. Few members of the organization had known that the decision to work for such transformation had taken place no less than ten years earlier. Fewer people still might have even known that this was a decision taken by and coordinated among the multitude of wings the Palestinian Ikhwan consisted of in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan and elsewhere in the Diaspora.

The Egyptian Connection

Up to the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967, Palestinian students

20) On 17 May 1977, under the leadership of Menachem Begin, Likud won its first electoral victory, which represented a major landmark in Israel's history bringing to an end three decades of Labor rule. Likud ruled for fifteen years until it was voted out of power in June 1992.

finishing high school successfully had to go abroad in pursuit of further education. There were no local universities at all and most of secondary school high-achievers joined universities in Egypt to study medicine, engineering and other sciences. The Egyptians had allocated seats in their universities for Palestinian students with a specific quota for those who came from the Gaza Strip, another for those who came from the West Bank and a third for those who came from other places of residence outside Palestine, what has become known as the ‘Palestinian Diaspora.’

However, for a number of years after the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank the intake of Palestinian students was suspended because their return to their homes could not be guaranteed. The Egyptian authorities, as well as the Palestinians themselves, were fearful that Israel might not allow the students to return back home. It was in the academic year 1970/1971 that the intake of students by Egyptian universities was resumed thanks to a deal brokered by the International Red Cross. Egypt agreed to take the students provided Israel allowed them back and the Red Cross guaranteed their safe return back home during the summer holidays and when they ultimately completed their studies.

It is believed, however, that it was the Israelis who pushed for this arrangement, or, to say the least, encouraged it as part of what became known as the ‘open bridges’ policy; that is of maintaining a controlled flow of people and merchandise across the River from the West Bank to Jordan.²¹⁾ As far as the Gaza Strip was concerned the policy served primarily to defuse the pressure that had been building up as a result of the accumulation of school leavers who finished high school in the thousands every year but could not be absorbed locally whether in further education or in the job market.²²⁾ These school leavers posed a serious threat to Israel because they qualified as potential recruits for the resistance.

Sheikh Ahmad Yassin had earlier been thinking about sending some of his students to

21) The Open Bridges policy was proposed by Moshe Dayan, Israeli Defense Minister, following the occupation as of 1967 of Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, so as to allow a route to be opened between the newly occupied territories and the Arab World via Jordan. According to the Stanford Journal of International Relations Dayan’s strategy was the employment in Israel of large numbers of Palestinian refugees languishing in camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Dayan assumed that a rise in living standards would compensate for the loss of political freedoms suffered by Palestinians under permanent Israeli rule, while enabling the Israeli economy to exploit the advantages of a large reservoir of cheap labor. In this manner, Dayan hoped to create an economic foundation for Palestinian participation in the status quo. (Source: http://www.stanford.edu/group/sjir/3.1.03_shang.html) However, the policy was condemned at the time by the PLO who suspected that the policy was mainly intended to normalize the ‘occupation’ of the territories and pave the way for annexing them. Palestinian nationalists saw the policy as nothing but a release valve for the jobless and homeless that effectively decreased the resistance of the population against Israeli occupation.

With the reopening of the two bridges across the Jordan River (the Damia and the Allenby or Hussein) the policy was applied for over twenty years with the dual aim of allowing:

- the export of surplus Palestinian farm products, potential competition for Israeli produce, to Arab markets, and
- the passage of Palestinian workers, mainly to the Gulf countries, in order to permit a flow of capital to the Occupied Territories which turned out to be an essential market for Israeli goods.

With this policy, the Israeli authorities also encouraged Palestinian emigration: Palestinians aged between twenty and forty crossing the bridges were not authorized to return for nine months and could lose their “right of residence” if they did not return within three years. The reinforcement of border checks and the enforcement of “internal” blockades on the autonomous enclaves created by the Oslo agreements (1994-1999) have considerably reduced the movements of people and, henceforth, the “open bridges” policy.

Source: The European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation (November 2001).

22) Basheer Nafi’, interview with the author in London, 15 September 2003.

Egypt to study at its military academy. Egypt permitted Palestinian students from Gaza to join the academy but with the suspension of intake only those that finished high school in Egypt could benefit from this facility.

A young Ikhwan recruit by the name of Musa Abu Marzuq was chosen by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin to leave the Strip and relocate to Egypt one year before finishing his secondary education in order to complete it there and thus be eligible for entry into the military academy. Things went according to plan until just before Abu Marzuq finished his high school education in Egypt when the Egyptian government announced new regulations. On the one hand it allowed Gaza students to travel to Egypt awarding them scholarships for both undergraduate and postgraduate education. On the other hand it decided to discontinue allowing Palestinian students to join the military academy. Abu Marzuq was told he might still be able to enter the Academy if he were to apply through the PLO, an option he preferred not to take. Instead, he joined the faculty of engineering.²³⁾

Like all his Ikhwan peers, Musa Abu Marzuq was born and raised in a refugee camp. It was in 1951 in one of Rafah refugee camp's UN-provided tents that his refugee mother gave birth to him; he was her sixth child and the first to be born in exile to a family that eventually had a total of five sons and five daughters. After Palestine was re-united by virtue of Israel's expansion in the aftermath of the June 1967 war he visited Yubnah, the village out of which his parents were driven in 1948. In the village, which is half way between Jaffa and Gaza, he was pointed by his elder brother Mahmud to the remains of the family house where Musa's five elder siblings were born. The building which housed Mahmud's school had still been standing; it had been turned into a Jewish welfare house providing social services to Jewish homeless women. Before it was 'cleansed' of its Palestinian inhabitants Yubnah had a population of fifteen thousands and was one of the biggest villages in the Jaffa region.²⁴⁾

Upon his arrival in Egypt Abu Marzuq joined a small Palestinian Ikhwan circle that had no formal ties with the local Egyptian Ikhwan organisation, which had not yet resurfaced anyway. He remained associated with the circle until its other more senior members departed Egypt upon finishing their studies. This coincided with the arrival in Egypt of the first batch of Palestinian Ikhwan students following the resumption of Palestinian student intake by Egyptian universities. The group was headed by 'Abd Al-'Aziz 'Awdah, one of the earlier recruits into the Ikhwan and a close associate of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.

Initially the Ikhwan students constituted a small minority among the total population of Palestinian students. Most of the 700-800 students arriving in Egypt every year had links or sympathised with the PLO-led nationalist camp. Gradually the trend started changing; as the Ikhwan students rapidly grew larger in number they needed to be properly organised. They formed a committee charged with the responsibility of administering the affairs of the students and maintaining liaison with the leadership in Gaza; it included in its membership Abu Marzuq, 'Awdah and a third student by the name of 'Ali Shakshak.

23) Musa Abu Marzuq, interview with the author in Damascus 17 July 2004.

24) Ibid.

The Palestinian Ikhwan students arrived in Egypt when one of the most painful chapters in modern Palestinian history was unfolding in Jordan, what the Palestinians refer to as the ‘black September’ tragedy. This was the culmination of mounting tension between the Hashemite regime and the PLO.

For more than three years the PLO had been increasing its military presence and its usage of the Jordanian territory to launch attacks against Israel. Pressure had been mounting on King Hussein, not only from the US and Israel but also from circles within his own regime, to act against the PLO, which was perceived as a threat to the Hashemite throne and seen as building a state within the state.

Events were brought to the boiling point on 6 September 1970 by the hijacking of four passenger planes by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a left-wing constituent member of the PLO. The hijackers flew three of the planes to Dawson’s Field in PLO-controlled northern Jordan and one to Cairo. While passengers and crews escaped unharmed the planes were blown up. Throughout September the Jordanian military launched attacks to push the PLO out of Jordan. Many thousands of PLO resistance fighters, Jordanian troops and civilians were killed. The actual figures continue to be disputed. PLO forces initially retreated to northern Jordan but within ten months they were driven out of Jordan completely. With nowhere else to go, they re-established themselves in Lebanon.

This dark and costly episode proved Sheikh Yassin’s vision once more to be accurate. He had always dreaded the consequences of forcing weak, unprepared and unwilling Arab regimes into a confrontation with Israel. The presence of the PLO in Jordan, notwithstanding the excesses and violations, was inevitably putting the Hashemite regime on a course toward clash with Israel.

What happened to the PLO in Jordan dominated the discussions among the Palestinian students in Egypt. The September events only deepened the divide among the Palestinians into two distinct camps: the nationalists, who were affiliates of the PLO and who blamed the entire problem on Jordan; and the Islamists, who were mostly the affiliates of the Ikhwan and who were more philosophical in their analysis distributing the blame equally between the Jordanian regime and the PLO.²⁵⁾ The events seemed also to reinforce the Islamists’ conviction that the priority should be for reforming the Arab political system and establishing a strong and independent Islamic state that is capable of leading the liberation effort against Israel.

Egypt had been in a crisis too. The nation’s self-claimed father-figure Gamal ‘Abd Al-Nassir died on 29 September 1970 following an autocratic rule that lasted since he and his fellow Free Officers toppled the monarchy in July 1952. Although the crushing defeat suffered by Nassir’s regime in the war with Israel in 1967 had weakened him and forced him to make a few concessions

25) The Ikhwan of Jordan had been taking active part in the guerilla warfare against Israel from Jordan. However, as they saw an imminent clash between the PLO and the Jordanian regime they decided to disband their own Fidayeen (fida’iyūn: guerillas) and close down their bases known at the time as Qawa’id al-Shuyukh (basis of the Sheikhs) eight months before the September tragic ‘civil war’ broke out. Of the prominent Ikhwan members that operated out of these bases were ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam and Ahmad Nawfal who both later left for Egypt to pursue their post-graduate education. In the eighties ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam settled in Peshawar as part of the pan-Islamic effort to aid the Afghani cause and was mysteriously assassinated together with two of his sons in 1989.

to burgeoning student and labour movements it was not until his death that tangible forms of opposition resurfaced. The post Nassir era saw secular communist or socialist forces give way to a rapidly spreading Islamic trend manifesting itself primarily on university campuses. This might have been aided by the policies adopted by Nassir's comrade and successor Anwar Al-Sadat. Calling himself "The Believing President," Sadat shunned the secular, socialist and nationalist position of his predecessor throwing himself into the fold of Islam as a source of image-making and as a claim of political legitimacy. The arrival of the Palestinian students in Egypt coincided with these significant changes that entailed among other things the lifting of restrictions on student activism.

By virtue of the fact that these Islamic students were high achievers in their high schools they reaped more grants to study high-demand subjects such as medicine and engineering. At one time they numbered about three hundred students distributed over several universities across Egypt. Under the leadership of 'Abd Al-'Aziz 'Awdah they were organized into circles: several in Cairo, two in Mansurah, one in Shbin El-Kum, one in Zaqaqiz, four in Alexandria and so on.

In autumn 1971, the Palestinian Ikhwan students were joined by a newcomer, Basheer Nafi',²⁶⁾ who arrived in Egypt to study veterinary medicine. Although originally born and brought up in the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza he arrived from Jordan where he had been since the aftermath of the 1967 war. His family had decided then to send him to Amman, the Jordanian capital, to stay with his uncle, a medical doctor also called Basheer Nafi', where he completed his secondary school education.

Basheer Nafi' soon joined the Ikhwan and became one of their prominent student figures. When in Jordan he was recruited by Fatah but he changed camp soon after arriving in Egypt. Having been disillusioned with the PLO in the aftermath of the September 1970 tragedy he thought the Ikhwan offered a better alternative. What convinced Nafi' of the Ikhwan was a book authored by Sayyid Qutb handed over to him by 'Ali Shakshak, who upon returning from a visit to his own family in Rafah brought Nafi' some goods from his own folks. That was an occasion for the two to engage in a lengthy and serious discussion about the Ikhwan and the future of the Palestinian issue. The meeting concluded with Nafi' receiving from his friend a copy of Qutb's *Ma'alim Fi Al-Tariq* (*Milestones*), which fascinated him and changed his way of thinking.²⁷⁾

26) Basheer Nafi' is today a British academic. In February 2003 the US Authorities accused him of being the UK head of Islamic Jihad. In fact he has never been a member of Islamic Jihad and has been strongly opposed to the idea of setting up such an organization in the first place. Fat'hi Al-Shiqaqi, founder of the movement, its late secretary general and fellow student in Cairo in the early seventies, was the one who associated Nafi' with the organization against his own will. (Source: Basheer Nafi', interview with the author in London, 15 September 2003.)

27) Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), who was imprisoned for ten years in 1954 and then executed in 1966, joined the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after the assassination of its founder Hassan Al-Banna. He soon became the leading ideologue of the group inspiring its members for no less than thirty years from the mid-fifties to the mid-eighties long after his execution. After joining the Ikhwan, he was appointed in 1953 editor of their publication *Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*. He then became the director of the Ikhwan's Media Section and soon afterwards he became a member of the Ikhwan's Guidance Council and Executive Committee, the two highest bodies in the organization. Qutb was initially imprisoned for three months in 1954 after the Ikhwan were accused by Nassir of making an attempt to assassinate him. As a result of severe torture he was transferred in May 1955 to the prison's hospital and was released due to bad health only to be rearrested in July 1955 and sentenced to 15

This was the period when Egypt started witnessing the emergence of Al-Jama'at Al-Islamiyah (Islamic Associations) among the Egyptian students on campus. Some of the members of these student groups became leading second-generation Egyptian Ikhwan figures a decade later. They included names such as 'Abdul Min'im Abul-Futuh and Issam Al-Iryan who had forged links with the Palestinian Ikhwan, purely as Islamic activists, long before they themselves had become members of the Egyptian Ikhwan. This was also the period when a number of Jordanian Ikhwan members had been pursuing their postgraduate studies in Egypt. They included such famous names as 'Abdullah 'Azzam, Fadl 'Abbas and Ahmad Nawfal who were also in communication with the Palestinian Ikhwan group. These were also the times when Ikhwan prisoners started being released from Egyptian jails. They included some Palestinians foremost among them 'Abd Al-Rahman Barud who was jailed in 1965 while a Ph.D student in Egypt.²⁸⁾

In the third year Egypt saw the arrival of a number of would-be prominent figures in the Palestinian movement such as Fat'hi Al-Shiqaqi, who like 'Awdah was very close to Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and one of his early recruits. Later arrivals also included Ibrahim Al-Maqadmah and Salah Shihadah.²⁹⁾ About a year later 'Abdul 'Aziz 'Awdah was expelled from the Ikhwan for misconduct following an internal investigation and a hearing chaired by his junior Al-Maqadmah. Basheer Nafi', who had been a close associate of 'Awdah, left the Ikhwan presumably out of sympathy with him. Officially, however, the Ikhwan never expelled Nafi' or intended to do so. They maintain that he left out of his own choosing.³⁰⁾

One of the issues that gripped the Islamic students in Egypt at the time was the necessity of improving the way in which the Ikhwan were organized and administered. Some of them did not like the fact that when they returned home for the summer holidays they were re-admitted into local Ikhwan circles. They felt that the issues raised and debated within these local circles did not

years most of which he spent in hospital. While in prison he witnessed the persecution of his colleagues. He was particularly affected by the Turrah prison massacre in 1957 when no less than ten of his 'comrades' were killed and many more wounded as prison guards opened fire on them in their cells. That is believed to have been the moment when Qutb started thinking of the creation of a disciplined secret cadre of devoted followers. Although he did not explicitly advocate the use of force against the state, self-claimed disciples have since extrapolated his theory to express a belief in the use of violence against the authorities that impose un-Islamic laws or modes of behaviour on Islamic societies. Upon an appeal for clemency by Iraqi President A. 'Arif, Qutb was released from prison in 1964 only to be rearrested in August 1965 and charged with terrorism and sedition. The detention, torture and execution of leading Islamic activists in Egypt was reacted to with rejection of all else but what was considered pure Islamic means and methods. Democracy and all it entailed was deemed alien and un-Islamic and 'the other' had become the enemy. Such rejection was based on the categorization of modern societies, including those in majority-Muslim countries, into Islam and jahiliyah as asserted by Sayyid Qutb in *Ma'alim Fi Al-Tariq* (translated into English as *Milestones*), the book for which he was executed in 1966.

- 28) Musa Abu Marzuq, interview with the author, Damascus, 17 July 2004. Upon his release from prison Barud resumed his studies and when awarded the doctorate left Egypt and settled in Saudi Arabia.
- 29) Al-Maqadmah was born in Jabalia Camp in the Gaza Strip in 1952 and was assassinated by the Israelis on 8 March 2003. Shihadah was born in Bayt Hanun in the Gaza Strip on 3 February 1953 and was assassinated by the Israelis on 23 July 2002.
- 30) Abu Marzuq, *ibid.* When the author interviewed Basheer Nafi' in September 2003 he was still under the impression that he was expelled from the movement as far back as 1974. It would seem that he simply left out of sympathy for 'Awdah who was the Ikhwan's student leader when he gave his *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) to the group and for whom he had great respect. He could not accept the Ikhwan's reasons, allegedly a misbehaviour of some sort, for terminating 'Awdah's membership.

rise up to the intellectual level attained by the students in Egypt nor were they up to the challenge facing the Palestinians under occupation. One of the issues raised pertained to the actual status of the students' organization in Egypt, whether it was autonomous or merely an extension of the one in Gaza. In addition, the students had been coming under pressure to voice an opinion regarding the Palestinian question, which until then did not seem to figure well in the thinking of the Ikhwan's leadership in Gaza. Summer after summer, when students returning home for the holiday spent the warm nights along the beach discussing these issues, a disgruntled trend started distinguishing itself from the rest of the group.

Fat'hi Al-Shiqaqi, a staunch Ikhwan loyalist, emerged as the leader of this trend which derived inspiration from a paper authored by a Syrian post-graduate student by the name of Tawfiq Al-Tayyib.³¹⁾ Entitled 'Al-Hall al-Islami ma ba'da Al-Nakbatayn' (The Islamic Solution after the two Catastrophes) reached the students in Egypt from Germany where Al-Tayyib was preparing his doctorate in philosophy.

The twenty-one A4-size pages document, including endnotes, amounted to a revolution in Islamic thinking. In his introduction, the author starts with raising the question: where should we position the 5th of June 1967 in the history of Islam? That was the day the Israelis captured from the Jordanians the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where Islam's third holiest Al-Aqsa Mosque is located. The swift six-day war dealt a fatal blow to Arab nationalism and triggered Islamic resurgence.

The writer goes on to ask whether the loss of Jerusalem as a consequence of that Arab defeat should be equated with the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders in 1099 or with the loss of Cordova to the Spaniards in 1237 or with the ransacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1285? None of those major past events are seen by Al-Tayyib as having had any civilizational significance. However, the fall of Jerusalem in 1967 represented the pinnacle of an ongoing civilizational onslaught on Islam and the Muslims and therefore this particular event was more catastrophic than all previous disasters.

According to Al-Tayyib, the 5th of June 1967 "has placed our Ummah and our faith face to face in front of their destiny: either existence or extinction, this Ummah will either live or will die, our culture will either stay on or disappear altogether. Islam as a faith and the Arabs as a people are facing their destiny, and the decisive factor is Palestine."³²⁾ His conclusion is that Palestine is indeed Islam's first and foremost cause and should therefore be the first and foremost priority of the Islamic movement. The fates of Islam and the Islamic movement, the writer asserts, are inseparable

31) Basheer Nafi', interview with the author, 15 September 2003. Al-Tayyib apparently never finished his studies. Instead he returned to Lebanon in the mid-seventies and established a publishing house called Al-Dar Al-'Ilmiyah. He was associated with the distinguished Islamic intellectual publication *Al-Muslim Al-Mu'asir* right from the beginning. The first issue of this publication labeled as the 'introductory' edition appeared in November 1974 and included another paper by Al-Tayyib entitled 'The Islamic Movement's absolute and necessary characteristics and its acquired characteristics'; the second issue labeled as combined editions of 1&2 appeared in April 1975.

32) Tawfiq Al-Tayyib, 'Al-Hall al-Islami ma ba'da al-Nakbatayn' available online at: http://www.qudsway.com/Links/Islamyiat/6/Html_Islamyiat6/6his11.htm

from the fate of Palestine.³³⁾

In the meantime Islamic political thought had been dominated by (over)emphasising the Islamic state whose re-establishment was seen as the main priority. The Ikhwan subscribed to this conviction and argued that Palestine could only be liberated from the Zionists by a strong Islamic state but insisted that this was conditional upon a strong Islamic society that in turn is comprised of conscientious, enlightened, observant and well-trained Muslim individuals. The loss of Palestine was seen as a symptom, or a consequence, of the loss of the Islamic Caliphate, itself having been the victim of Muslim decline and departure from the ‘true path of Islam.’ The Caliphate, therefore, had to be reinstated in order for the symptoms of the illness to disappear, but that could only be done through a gradual and long term process of reforming the individual, the family and entire community.³⁴⁾

Ironically, this argument vis-à-vis the question of Palestine had not been the original position of the Ikhwan. In the months leading to the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948 the Ikhwan sent hundreds of volunteers from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan and several other places to fight against the Zionist forces in Palestine. The new thinking evolved out of the crisis that hit the Ikhwan across the Arab world as a consequence of the persecution they suffered at the hands of despotic secular nationalist regimes that claimed authority and sought to derive legitimacy from the Palestinian question. For much of the fifties and the sixties Islamic and nationalist trends competed and quarrelled and Palestine was at the core of ongoing debates. The fiercest of these debates took place on campus among students affiliated to the two opposing trends. The debate focused mainly on how the Arabs could best resist the Zionist project, which everyone agreed was the biggest threat. The Islamists insisted that the liberation of Palestine would only occur when Islam is adopted as a way of life, and therefore participating in an effort to liberate Palestine undertaken by an un-Islamic regime would be unthinkable.³⁵⁾ They questioned in particular the legitimacy of *jihad* under the leadership of secular nationalist regimes such as that of Nassir in Egypt and the Ba’th in Syria who had been perceived as waging war against Islam and thus were considered to be in the service of the Zionists themselves. Not surprisingly, when some of the Ikhwan were motivated to join the Palestinian resistance against Israel in the late sixties they insisted on setting up their separate bases in the Jordan Valley. In fact, they had no option, for political and logistical reasons, but to fight under the umbrella of Fatah, the PLO’s main faction.

The debate among the Palestinian Ikhwan students in Egypt was fuelled further when some of them were approached in the mid-seventies by members of Fatah to convince them of joining

33) Ibid.

34) The Caliphate is the name of the political system that came to existence immediately following the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 and lasted until 1924 when the Ottoman state came to an end. In its golden era, which lasted for a brief period, the Caliphate’s foundations include the principles that authority belongs to the *Ummah* (people), that decision-making is through *shura* (a process of consultation), that rule and ruled are equal before the law, and that law-making must not contradict the fundamentals of *Shari’ah*, the set of revealed guidelines stated in the Qur’an. While *Shari’ah* continued to be respected for much of history, *shura* was compromised quite early in the history of Islam.

35) Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi A Democrat within Islamism*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001; p. 18.

the “Islamic wing” of the organisation known as Fatah Al-Islami (Islamic Fatah). A Fatah member from Al-Khizindar family arrived in Cairo from Beirut to challenge the Ikhwan students on the basis of their own slogans. The Ikhwan had always claimed that *‘jihad’* and *‘istish’had’* (the seeking of martyrdom) were their most sublime wishes.³⁶⁾ Why not join in and accomplish your wishes, they were asked. No, never under a secular nationalist banner, they’d answer. In addition they argued that the emergence of an Islamic wing within Fatah was intended to absorb the Islamists and assimilate them rather than recognise them as an autonomous entity.³⁷⁾

The Kuwaiti Connection

During the same period the Palestinian Ikhwan in Kuwait were coming under the hammer too. The emergence of Fatah and other PLO factions as defenders of Palestinian rights and leaders of the struggle for liberation constituted a serious challenge to the Palestinian Islamists.

Kuwait, the tiny oil-rich state at the tip of the Gulf, had since the late fifties been the host of an increasing number of Palestinians who, like many Arabs and Asians, were attracted by its fast growing economy and rapid development. Compared to its much bigger and much richer neighbour Saudi Arabia, Kuwait was much more open and much more comfortable to live in. In the aftermath of the 1967 war, it saw an influx of Palestinian professionals and labourers, in most cases accompanied by their families, from the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jordan. Some of the early Palestinian professionals to arrive in Kuwait in the late fifties were members of the Ikhwan. Some of them were fleeing Nassirist persecution in Gaza and Egypt; others were young graduates who had just finished their education in Egyptian universities and were looking for good jobs so as to support their families back home.

In the late fifties Kuwait provided the ground for the formation of the nucleus that less than a decade later gave birth to Al-Fatah.³⁸⁾ Similarly, in the late seventies, it provided the safe haven for the founding of the Palestinian Ikhwan student movement, which played a pivotal role in paving the way for the emergence of Hamas in the late eighties.

The early seventies were the years of Islamic revival; young men and women were being attracted to religiosity in increasing numbers. In Kuwait, like in other places, the defeat of Nassirism resuscitated the Ikhwan. The group saw an opportunity in the readiness of the public to question Arab nationalism and its claims. It benefited from the arrival in Kuwait of a number of Egyptian scholars and activists who had just been released from prison in the aftermath of the death of Egypt’s despot Gamal ‘Abd Al-Nassir in 1970. One such scholar was Hassan Ayyoub who rallied

36) See Chapter Eight for a detailed discussion of the concepts of jihad and martyrdom.

37) ‘Imad al-‘Alami, interview with the author, Damascus 13 August 2003.

38) According to Khalil Al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), cofounder of Al-Fatah, the first founding meeting was held in Kuwait in the second half of 1957. Five Palestinians, who came from different locations in the Arab world, attended the meeting. They represented four major groupings of Fatah founders: the Kuwait group, which included Yassir ‘Arafat, Khalil Al-Wazir and Salah Khalaf; the Qatar group, which included Muhammad Yusuf Al-Najjar, Kamal ‘Adwan, Mahmud ‘Abbas and Rafiq Al-Natshah; the Saudi Arabia group, which included Sa‘id al-Muzayyin, Mu‘adh ‘Abid and Ahmad Wafi; and the Gaza group, which included Fat’hi Al-Bal’awi, As‘ad al-Saftawi, Salim al-Za’nun and ‘Awni al-Qishawi.

behind him hundreds of admirers whose thirst and hunger for Islamic knowledge and spirituality turned them into faithful disciples. His weekly lectures attracted large crowds and were recorded on audio-cassettes and distributed across the country and beyond. It seemed that there was not an issue in which this scholar was not well versed. He lectured on history, theology, jurisprudence and philosophy. Soon afterwards he started publishing a series of books on Islamic theological and jurisprudential matters as well as on contemporary issues of socio-political nature.

Despite having been originally a member of the Ikhwan and having been imprisoned for years because of that back home in Egypt, Sheikh Ayyoub did not seem to like the idea of the existence of an Ikhwan organisation in Kuwait. He thought the era of the Ikhwan was over and it was time to think of another way forward and another platform. His followers grew into an independent current and Sheikh Ayyoub encouraged the Palestinians among them to involve themselves in the effort aimed at liberating their country. Several Palestinian organisations in Kuwait sought his endorsement and delegations from Al-Fatah and even the more left-wing PFLP (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) visited him looking for a way to benefit from his enthusiasm for jihad in Palestine.

During that period the Palestinian Ikhwan in Kuwait, just as everywhere else, were more interested in the education and training of their members and supporters so as to shield them from what they deemed to be alien and hostile ideologies and socio-political trends. The issue that mattered most for them was rescuing the individual, the family and the community as a whole from the onslaught of Western ideas whether liberal or Marxist. Islamic rehabilitation of the Muslim individual, the Muslim family and consequently the Muslim society was deemed the answer to all problems including the occupation of Palestine by the Jews.³⁹⁾

Two main factors might have prevented the Palestinian Ikhwan from engaging in the national effort for Palestine. On the one hand they were apprehensive of the prospect of losing their Islamic identity. They saw this happen to the founders of Al-Fatah who were all apart from Yassir 'Arafat members of the Ikhwan but ended up shedding off their Islamic ideology in favour of secular nationalism. On the other hand the Ikhwan lost the confidence, perhaps also the ability, to discern the more important from the less important. The persecution they, or some of their 'brothers' in Egypt and other countries in the region, suffered forced them to look more inwardly with the consequence of losing the capacity for recognising important national concerns as Islamic issues that deserved their attention. Their primary concern had been to found, preserve and express the Islamic identity en route accomplishing the pan-Islamic project.⁴⁰⁾ That tendency might have been aided by the fact that in most Arab countries the movement had been forced underground. Ikhwan members would argue that nothing was likely to work without first establishing an Islamic order, an idea not far from that espoused by members of Hizb Al-Tahrir.⁴¹⁾ They would point out that their

39) Khalid Mish'al, interview with the author, Damascus 13 August 2003.

40) Ibid.

41) Hizb Al-Tahrir Al-Islami was established in Jerusalem in 1953 by Taqiy Al-Din Al-Nabhani (1909-1977). The party declares itself to be a political party with Islam as its ideology and the revival of the Islamic Ummah as its goal. It seeks to achieve this goal by creating a single Islamic state, erected on the ruins of existing regimes.

predecessors have tried before; the Egyptian Ikhwan's experience prior to the fallout with Nassir would be cited as proof.

Ironically, the Ikhwan, who sent hundreds of volunteers to prevent the fall of Palestine into Zionist hands in 1948, had by the early seventies been rationalising their abstention from the Jihad in Palestine. What happened to Palestine, they would argue, was nothing but a symptom of the sickness that afflicted the Ummah, which had been weakened by the lack of religious observance. The most drastic consequence of wandering away from the path of Islam, they would explain, had been the collapse of the Islamic civilisational project, which in turn enabled the enemies to occupy Muslim lands, including Palestine. The solution, it was explained, would be to return to Islam and establish its law and norms first; only then would the Ummah be in a position to face its external enemies whether in Palestine or elsewhere.⁴²⁾

Sheikh Hassan Ayyoub refuted this logic and ridiculed those that defended it. His ability to attract many Palestinians around him alarmed the Palestinian Ikhwan and forced them to re-think their discourse and strategy. As they did so, they discovered how faulty, even dangerous, their claims had been. The phenomenon of Islamic revival had broken the monopoly of organised groups on Islamic awareness activities. At the same time it provided these groups with a dose of confidence that shattered the barriers of fear and anxiety. The days when only affiliates of the Ikhwan showed signs of religiosity were gone; society was becoming increasingly religious and observance of Islamic values and norms was increasingly becoming the norm rather than the exception. Any delay on the part of the Palestinian Ikhwan to espouse the cause of liberating their homeland from Israeli occupation was likely to cost them their credibility and do away with the accomplishments they had reaped.

One of the most important sectors to be invaded by Islamic revival was the youth and students sector. This is the sector that had the greatest potential for recruitment and where competition was at its utmost among the various ideological and political groups. The Ikhwan, like others, started targeting high school students recruiting them and instructing them to form Islamic student societies that acted themselves as publicity and recruitment platforms. However, their greatest success was at the mosques where 'mosque committees' would be set up to look after the youth and provide them with social, recreational and educational services.

Setting up a student section within the organisation of the Palestinian Ikhwan in Kuwait in the mid-seventies was a historical turning point. It was a timely decision that coincided with the entry into Kuwait University of the first batch of young Ikhwan members that were recruited before leaving their high schools. One of these young recruits was Khalid Mish'al, who today is the head of Hamas Political Bureau.

Khalid was born in the West Bank village of Silwad near Ramallah in 1956. He lived there for eleven years until 1967 when he was forced, like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, to leave

It is currently banned in most of the Arab countries, but has lately been active in several Western countries among the Muslim youth.

42) Interview with Khalid Misha'al; op.cit.

home and settle in Jordan. Soon afterwards, young Khalid left Jordan for Kuwait where his father had already been working and living since before 1967. After completing his primary education in 1970 he joined the prestigious 'Abdallah Al-Salim Secondary School which only high achieving pupils could join and which was in the early seventies a hub of intense political and ideological activities. It was in his second year at Al-Salim school that he was recruited by the Ikhwan and proved right from the start to be a serious and dedicated member. Upon finishing his fourth year successfully he secured admission at Kuwait University where he studied for a BSc degree in Physics.

Kuwait University had an active branch of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), which had been under the absolute control of the Al-Fatah movement. Initially shunned by the Islamists, they decided by 1977 to join in and contest for its leadership election. Those were the days when former Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat visited Israel for the first time to appeal for an end to the conflict. Khalid and his colleagues formed Al-Haqq (Truth) List which launched an election campaign that focused primarily on two issues: the war in Lebanon and its impact on the Palestinian cause and Sadat's visit to the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem and its repercussions.

However, working from within GUPS proved impossible; the Islamists felt constantly impeded and realised they would never be given a chance. By 1980, two years after Khalid Mish'al's graduation from Kuwait University, his juniors decided to leave GUPS and form their own Palestinian association on campus. Kuwait's Islamic Association of Palestinian Students was one of several such student associations set up by the Palestinian Ikhwan around the world as socio-political platforms for Palestinian students who did not wish to join the PLO's GUPS. Among the most active of these associations were the ones set up in the early eighties in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and in several other European countries where a large number of Palestinian students had been pursuing their studies. Many of these students had already lost faith in the PLO whose leadership seemed to them intent on settling for much less than what they grew up dreaming of: the liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea and the return of all the refugees to their homes.