

# A Hamas Primer

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There's a lot of mis-information out in the world, which makes reasoned argument all the more difficult. So, with a hope of laying some sound groundwork for discussion, please read the following, written by a mentor of mine, Professor Ken Stein. Ken was my Middle Eastern History Prof @ Emory. But if that doesn't give you cred with him, here's why you should at least read and consider what he has to say...

About Professor Stein:

In Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. Kenneth W. Stein is a Professor of Contemporary Middle Eastern History, Political Science and Israeli Studies and Director of the Institute for the Study of Modern Israel. The Institute engages in upgrading Israel Studies on the Emory campus. He is also president of the Center for Israel Education which writes curriculum provides workshops for Jewish and non-Jewish professionals interested in upgrading their knowledge about the modern Middle East and modern Israeli society, history, culture, politics, and international relations. For more information about the objectives accomplishments of both organizations, please see [www.ismi.emory.edu](http://www.ismi.emory.edu) and [www.israeled.org](http://www.israeled.org)

Ok.. so there has been a lot of outpouring of sympathy for Hamas and the Palestinians. For sure, its horrible. War is horrible especially when innocent civilians are hurt or killed. But I think many of us forget just what Israel is dealing with. So with Ken's permission, I am reposting a piece he had originally written for [Encarta](#)



***Hamas:*** *a Palestinian group seeking to create a single, Islamic state in historic Palestine, which is now largely divided between Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.*

***Hamas:***, *meaning zeal or fervor in Arabic, is an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya, or Islamic Resistance Movement.*

The Hamas charter calls for Israel's destruction, and Hamas has engaged in terrorist activities [to meet these aims]. It entered the political arena for the first time in 2005 by participating in municipal elections in Gaza and the West Bank. In the 2006 legislative elections for the Palestinian National Authority, Hamas found significant support among Palestinian Arabs residing in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.

Hamas leadership grew up in the late 1940s, mostly as impoverished offspring of Palestinian refugees. Many of Hamas leaders were educated in Cairo during the rule of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Present members include religious leaders, sheikhs (Arab chiefs), intellectuals, technocrats, businessmen, young activists, and paramilitary fighters.

To cultivate support, Hamas has provided social services to the needy in the 11 refugee camps in Gaza. Providing social welfare and education through clinics, kindergartens, summer camps, medical services, sports programs, and job programs tied the Hamas leadership to its supporters. Mosques and Islamic religious organizations have been Hamas's most important vehicles for spreading its message and providing its services. Partly funded by its members, most funds come from sympathizers abroad. Because the European Union (EU) and the United States have labeled Hamas a terrorist organization, funds raised for Hamas in Europe and the United States have been seized, and the organizations fundraising ability has been curtailed.

## History

The group was founded in 1988 as a militant segment of the Palestinian Arab national movement and was connected ideologically to the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt 60 years earlier. The Muslim Brotherhood rejected the influence of Western culture and called for the increased role of Islam in government and society. Hamas was created after the 1987 outbreak of the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising, against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It emphasized the destruction of Israel, the gradual return to Islamic values, and the rejection of secularization. Hamas firmly opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords, in which the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel engaged in mutual recognition for the purpose of Israel's gradual transfer of power, land, and limited self-rule to the PLO.

Led by Ahmed Yassin, a charismatic Gaza leader, who was a religious leader by study but not formal theological training, Hamas catalyzed physical confrontation against Israelis and Israeli institutions. It sought to change the secular nature of the PLO. Meanwhile, leadership of the PLO viewed Hamas, as well as the much more militant Islamic Jihad organization, as significant threats to the PLO's dominance and position as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

During the first intifada Hamas urged Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to confront Israeli authorities. It coordinated labor strikes against Israel and conducted a campaign to try to make Muslims adhere to a strict Islamic code. In 1989 Hamas members kidnapped and murdered two Israeli soldiers in a direct attack on Israel. In response, Israel declared Hamas an illegal organization, and arrested Yassin. Yassin was later exiled to Jordan but returned to the Gaza Strip in the late 1990s. After several more terrorist attacks, in December 1992 Israel

expelled more than 400 Hamas members and supporters to a remote area inside the Lebanese border, where they were left for a year.

After denouncing the September 1993 Oslo Accords, Hamas increased its strikes against Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as in Israel proper. It boycotted the January 1996 Palestinian presidential and legislative council elections. The elections were won by Fatah, headed by PLO leader Yasir Arafat. The boycott was in part because Hamas knew its showing would not be impressive, but also Hamas wanted to avoid giving legitimacy to the PLOs recognition of Israel and to the secular nationalist camp that the PLO represented. Under the accord, Israel, the United States, and Western European nations asked the newly created Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to suppress Hamass attacks. Arafat periodically restrained Hamas terrorist actions against Israel but he did not suppress them altogether.

Hamas activists were pleased when the PLO and the PNA vaguely agreed to end armed struggle in its confrontation with Israel. For those Palestinians who did not want a political solution to their differences with Israel and only wanted to use violence against the Jewish state, Hamas was a political umbrella under which these Palestinians could continue their armed struggle against Israel. Hamas was also pleased that the U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian summit in the summer of 2000 failed. It welcomed and participated in the outbreak of the second intifada against Israel in September 2000.

The renewed uprising led to a significant increase in support for Hamas views among the regions Muslim Arab population. For Hamas, the second intifada reaffirmed Palestinians steadfastness against Israel, the failure of diplomatic negotiations, and its policy of studied patience in seeking to broaden the groups appeal in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. During the intifada, Hamas sponsored and organized actions that were responsible for the killing of more than 350 Israeli men, women, and children, and the wounding of many others. From 2000 to 2004, Israel responded by building a fence around Gaza and attacking perpetrators and planners of the suicideattacks.

In March 2004 Israel Defense Forces assassinated the Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin in a helicopter gunship attack as Yassin left a mosque in the Gaza Strip. The next month Israel assassinated his successor Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, a cofounder of Hamas. In both cases Israel claimed that these two men had collective responsibility for killing Israeli civilians. Israel announced a willingness to continue such targeted assassinations as part of its war on terrorism. The assassinations occurred as Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon said he was ready to unilaterally evacuate some 9,500 Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005.

Succession in Hamas devolved to Mahmoud Zahar, another founder of the organization, and Ismail Haniyeh, who resided in the Gaza Strip. Hamas organized itself under a disciplined collective leadership, which also included Khaled Mashaal, who headed its political wing in Damascus, the capital of Syria. In March 2005 Hamas announced its readiness to participate in the upcoming July elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), a reversal of its stance in 1996. When the July elections were postponed to January 2006, Hamas opposed the delay, but gained extra time to secure its popularity. Meanwhile, Hamas successfully contested municipal elections held in 2005 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In virtually every city, Fatah and Hamas

shared local control of politics, with Hamas taking credit for streamlining budgets and eliminating corruption. Political observers viewed Hamass successes at the local town and village levels not as an endorsement of Hamass political or ideological views but as revenge against the laxity and corruption of the Fatah movement in the PNA.

Also in March 2005 Hamas agreed to a cease-fire with Israel. Known as the Cairo Declaration because it was mediated by the Egyptians, Hamas and 12 other Palestinian factions agreed to a stipulated calm or cease-fire. It was an informal response to Israels withdrawal from the cities of Jericho and Tulkarm in the West Bank. Hamas leaders made clear that their indirect cease-fire or hudna with Israel was tactical; the organizations primary goal remained the liberation of all of Palestine and the imposition of stricter Islamic rule. As Hamas leader Zahar declared in March 2005, Hamas is ready to accept a long-term truce, keep the conflict open if our generation cannot act, it must not make concessions we can establish a state on any inch without ceding the other inches. With periodic flare-ups as exceptions, the calm held through the 2006 PLC elections. Noticeably there were no attacks against Israel prior to or immediately after Israels August 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. At the local political level, Palestinian municipalities quietly made arrangements with Israeli officials where electricity and other services were dependent upon Israeli supply.

In the January 2006 parliamentary elections for the PLC, Hamas won 76 of the 132 seats, emerging as the dominant political force among Palestinians. Fatah won 43 seats. Under Palestinian law, Hamas obtained the right to name the prime minister and Cabinet and run the daily affairs of the PNA. It soon named Haniyeh as the prime minister. The presidency, however, remained in the hands of Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah. Seven out of ten eligible Palestinian voters in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem cast ballots, a comparatively high turnout for any democratically held election.

Hamas' overwhelming victory was attributed to dismay with the cronyism, corruption, and mismanagement of the ruling Fatah party. Hamas polling strength was also aided by political fragmentation in Fatah, which was divided between the old guard leadership that had surrounded Arafat and Abbas and younger party stalwarts. Unlike the last parliamentary elections held in 1996, Hamas engaged in disciplined electoral politics this time because it had a chance to control the politics and administration of the Gaza Strip, evacuated by Israel in 2005. With Arafat gone, Gaza as a prize for rule, and international financial assistance waiting to pour into the PNA, Hamas had every incentive to participate in these elections. With its unexpected success, Hamas was faced with reconciling rhetoric with reality. Its rhetoric still called for Israels elimination. But realistically its objective was to govern and to control education, social welfare, health care, and religious affairs. To receive the external funds the majority of Palestinians so desperately needed, Hamas sought to find a formula that did not drop its political objectives, but was sufficiently moderate in tone and actions to open the cash flow.

United States and European Union (EU) officials, however, would not accept a Hamas-led government unless Hamas recognized Israels right to exist and renounced violence. They cut off aid to the Hamas-led government soon after the election. Israels newly installed government of Ehud Olmert also decided to withhold tax and customs revenues owed to the PNA. As part of the Oslo Accords, Israel retained the authority to collect tax and customs receipts in Gaza and the

West Bank. Unwilling to meet the demands of Israel, the EU, and the United States, Hamas sought funding from Iran, which it was successful in securing but unsuccessful at delivering. When PNA prime minister Haniyeh returned to Gaza in December 2006 from a trip to Iran, the Israeli authorities denied him entry. He was eventually allowed in but without the millions in aid that he had obtained from Iran. Meanwhile serious outbreaks of armed conflict erupted between Hamas and Fatah security forces, including reported assassination attempts on both Haniyeh and Abbas.

In February 2007 Saudi Arabia sought to mediate the conflict between Hamas and Fatah. At a meeting in Mecca the two sides agreed to form a unity government. Hamas made a concession by saying it would respect past agreements reached between the PLO and the PNA with Israel, agreements that explicitly recognized Israel's right to exist and that called for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Saudi Arabia also sought to revive its 2002 peace proposal, which called for Arab countries pledge peaceful and normal relations with Israel in exchange for an end to the occupation. The Saudis also tried to involve the United States in a renewed peace process. In March the unity government was formally created. Key positions in the Cabinet were given to Fatah supporters so that no representatives of Israel, the EU, or the United States would have to meet with members of Hamas. International attention to the situation in Palestine, however, was largely overshadowed by the continuing U.S. occupation of Iraq, which threatened to spill over into conflict with Iran. U.S.-Iraq War.

The unity government failed to take hold, however, as Israel and the United States continued to withhold aid from the PNA. In early June 2007 renewed conflict between Hamas and Fatah led to Fatah's ouster from Gaza in heavy street fighting. In retaliation Abbas in mid-June swore in an emergency, caretaker government in the West Bank, where Fatah has a stronger base of popular support. Abbas appointed the Palestinian economist Salam Fayyad, who is well regarded in Western countries, as prime minister, foreign minister, and finance minister of the PNA. Abbas suspended a provision in the Palestinian Basic Law, which functions as the PNA's constitution, that required parliamentary approval of Fayyad and Abbas other Cabinet appointments. The leadership of Hamas denounced the suspension and called the new government illegitimate.

Almost immediately after the appointment of the emergency government, the EU, Israel, and the United States signaled that aid and tax revenue would resume to the PNA. In the meantime, however, the cease-fire that had been observed between Hamas and Israel broke down. Hamas guerrillas resumed firing rockets into Israel, especially toward the Israeli border town of Sederot. Israel responded with air strikes and military incursions. Human rights groups accused Israel of a disproportionate response, while also condemning Hamas rocket attacks. Israel also tightened control of its borders with the Gaza Strip and used its supervision of Gazas electricity and food deliveries to cut off both in retaliation for the attacks, a practice that human rights organizations condemned as collective punishment of the entire Gaza population.

In June 2008 talks brokered by Egyptian officials resulted in another informal cease-fire. Israel warned Hamas that it would be held responsible for any violations of the cease-fire, including attacks by the militant group known as Islamic Jihad.

*So go now. Have a reasoned discussion if you can. But keep in mind just who Hamas is and what they believe should be done with the State of Israel (ok, so you know where my allegiance lies, but I'm happy to debate!).*