

**FROM GAZA TO THE WEST BANK:
AN INTERVIEW WITH SHAYKH HASAN YOUSEF OF HAMAS
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The U.S. media frenzy over the evacuation of Jewish settlers from Gaza has not presented many perspectives on the Palestinian side. When I visited Gaza in July, it was somewhat difficult to feel sympathy with the young people who had taken over Palestinian homes to raise the orange flags symbolizing opposition to the withdrawal. They were grouped atop a building throwing rocks at the roof and small children of the Palestinian family next to them. Their father was red-eyed, explaining that he had stayed up all night lest the young people storm the house or injure his 11 children in the middle of the night. His eldest son had put on his *kafiyya* (head cloth) as a sign of resistance, and will no doubt remember this incident for the rest of his life.

Across the street, the Army had bulldozed beach cottages to prevent resisters from using these as similar bases. Further down the coast, a large group of settlers were holed up in an abandoned beach-front hotel. Israeli soldiers were present, but had not yet received orders to remove the young people. They had come, in some cases, from New York, or Jerusalem; they were not members of the nearby settlement. An Arabic-speaking Israeli colleague told me ruefully that his son was among them, and they had argued strenuously about the issue. He is on the “blue-side,” supporting withdrawal.

Settlers stand to lose from the disengagement, and so they resisted. Who stands to win? The people of al-Mawasi, a rectangular area within the Gaza Strip that has been completely closed to transit and cut residents off, in many cases, from their homes and relatives in other Gaza towns, stand to benefit.

I interviewed a group of truck drivers who wait for hours in the hot sun for permission to drive through the checkpoint. They look forward to the disengagement and to resumption of fishing and use of the coast, but they expressed some cynicism about the Palestinian Authority (PA), which has announced its intentions to provide security to the area. I also interviewed their *mukhtar*, or town leader, who more formally and cautiously expressed his hopes for the future.

Many questions about the future concern HAMAS, the Islamist party that is more popular in Gaza than the PA.

The day after I interviewed Palestinian residents of Gaza, I went to meet Shaykh Hasan Yousef, who heads the political division of the West Bank branch of HAMAS. As a senior leader and spokesperson of the organization, he has survived assassination attempts, imprisonment, exile, and infighting. He, like others, is responding to divisions on each side of the conflict; Israelis divided over disengagement, and Palestinians divided over the future of their own political leadership and proper means of securing sovereignty. Palestinians, particularly in Ramallah, Jenin, Jericho, and Jerusalem, do not see the Gaza withdrawal as a great triumph—it was not, after all, a plan that they were initially party to. Their recent concerns center on the behavior of armed groups in Ramallah, and some of the border patrol in Jerusalem (this on the heels of a local scandal). People were concerned by the efforts of the PA in its crackdown on certain Al-Aqsa brigades, and the possibility that the Authority was implicated in, or unwilling, or unable to control armed groups’ shakedowns or harassment of local citizens.

HAMAS had refused to participate in a national unity cabinet earlier in July. Yousef stated

that HAMAS had no wish to be part of the PA, known locally as the *sulta*, just for the sake of presenting a united front to the Israelis, when issues deeply divide the secularly and religiously based organizations, rather the Party would wait for upcoming elections.¹

Those staffing Shaykh Yousef's office were well aware of the local events. Its location illustrates the centrality of HAMAS to the West Bank. I visited Yassir Arafat's grave at the Muqata` in Ramallah, a small enclosure in that hilltop location which symbolizes the end of an era, just prior to the meeting. Yousef's business offices displayed none of the excessive grandeur or nouveau chic of the villas of Ramallah; they comprised a small unit, with a waiting room and desk area outside, as Yousef is frequently interviewed. Yousef's 28-year-old son provided tea, fruit, a fan, and biographical details while I waited for the Shaykh to complete his prior appointment. Shaykh Yousef then supplied more background, speaking in beautifully-phrased formal Arabic.

Shaykh Yousef joined the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), an Islamist organization originally established in 1929 by Shaykh Hasan al-Banna in Isma'iliyya, a city in the Suez Canal zone. In the 1940s, Muslims from other countries formed branches of the organization in the Sudan, Syria, Palestine, and elsewhere. Yousef became a member of the MB while at university in Jordan, where he obtained a BA in *shari`ah* (Islamic law) in the early 1970s. The Jordanian and Palestinian branch of the organization was not large until the Islamist movements in the region as a whole began to grow in the 1970s. In the late 1980s, HAMAS formed from elements of the MB. The primary founders of the Party are clerics, and other leaders are intellectuals and professionals, as they are in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Yousef is well-known in the West Bank, even in the countryside, because he used to travel from village to village to preach in the mosques, and people remember him from these early days. HAMAS subsequently acquired its own reputation, and he is associated with its growth. His son recalls the first time he was arrested by the Israelis and that his family had no income, or even food, while he was incarcerated. He was repeatedly arrested, released, then rearrested, once after only 5 hours, for periods lasting years.

The Israelis exiled hundreds of Islamist party members to Marj al-Zuhur in southern Lebanon in 1992, and Yousef was among them. They reasoned that exiling these individuals would diminish the numbers of recruits to HAMAS in the prison population. The exiles became a bargaining chip, and reportedly established closer ties with Hizbullah.

The Shaykh and his son explained that Hamas did not develop a military wing until 1987. After that date, when the Israeli authorities went after the organization, they generally pursued the political leadership rather than the military wing of the organization because they could not locate or target the latter. Shaykh Yousef was most recently released from prison in Israel in November 2004. In March of that year, Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, the director-general of HAMAS was assassinated by an Israeli missile, as subsequently was his successor, `Abd al-Aziz Rantisi.

HAMAS refused to participate in the elections for a Palestinian president after Arafat's death. HAMAS is now competing with the PA for the "hearts and minds" of Palestinians, and Yousef is hard at work campaigning for the Party in preparation for the next set of Palestinian elections.²

Interview.

SHY: Welcome, welcome.

SZ: After introducing myself, explaining my interests, and that I am not visiting in any official

capacity, I inquire about HAMAS statements about the war on Islam vs. the war on terror.

SHY: We welcome this opportunity to be permitted to communicate with you. We want to establish better relations with those in the West and share and explain our views, hoping this will lead to an improved dialogue in the future. And, of course, everything we say is all unofficial, under the table. But, I want to know whether you think there will be any sort of shift, or is there already any kind of shift in U.S. policy toward the Palestinians?

SZ: Our country is not of one mind. Certainly, there is a high level of popular anxiety that has resulted from the terrible events of 9/11, and that is not improving the prospects for dialogue. But many of us support our government and our Constitution without agreeing with all aspects of our foreign policy, and we are free to express our concerns in that regard.

Let me ask you, how do you view the situation now? What will the period following the Gaza disengagement bring?

SHY: Now, we are facing a critical situation. We are very hopeful in light of the disengagement from Gaza, however, removal of the settlers still means that all of the key issues [that would lead to improved Israeli-Palestinian relations] have yet to be discussed. These are, for instance:

- deliberate erosion of Arab (East) Jerusalem;
- the Wall, or security boundary;
- the large number of Palestinian political prisoners, still 8,000 of them. And remember that in every agreement we have made, the Israelis promised to release them, but they have only released small numbers, and at the same time, have arrested many more Palestinians;
- closure of our charitable institutions.

HAMAS' reputation is excellent. People trust us and know that we will help them, but now we are not allowed to do so. This is not actually hurting us or our reputation; but these closures [of charitable institutions] are affecting the most vulnerable and poorest sector of Palestinian society. Of course, we are ready to adopt any measures of transparency as required in the provision of charitable assistance, and, in fact, we were one of the most transparent groups. Anyway, our records would be totally open to any kind of scrutiny, but we believe the Palestinian people need assistance.

SZ: If you were able to communicate directly with our government about HAMAS' aims and opinions, what would you say?

SHY: If I could make a list of items to present to President George Bush, all of the points that I already mentioned above would be on the list, but also most importantly,

- deliver measures of actual freedom to Palestinians; allowing him or her their human and political rights.
- please become aware, and alert your administration to the contradiction inherent in promoting democratization in the Middle East while simultaneously backing a system [Israeli] in which every physical movement, every telephone call, every meeting, every conversation is monitored, and there is no freedom at all.

Besides, there are "wanted" individuals that the Israelis have not been able to apprehend for

years. These measures have not helped them do so. Why are they able to remain in hiding? Because they defend the population and the population reciprocates.

SZ: Do you spend time speaking about HAMAS outside of the region?

SHY: This has not been possible because of the political situation here, restrictions of travel, and so on.

So do you think there is any opening for HAMAS now?

SZ: I believe there are those who understand this region more thoroughly, have witnessed the growth of the Islamic awakening, and who are realists. They believe that moderates can participate politically in a responsible manner and encourage others to cease violence.

SHY; But why are there objections to HAMAS?

SZ: The Israelis characterize your organization as a violent organization. And people everywhere are afraid of Islamist organizations that utilize violence.

But also there are other problems—some people are not very familiar with all of the range of Islamist groups, and they lump them together and do not distinguish between one group and another. They see your organization as being the same as, say, the Refah (Welfare) Party in Turkey or the Wahhabi extremists in Saudi Arabia.

Also, Westerners complain about your position on women's rights. Do you impose Islamic covering as Gama`at al-Islamiyya did in Egypt? Is there not tension between the secular Palestinian women's parties (which developed from the four parties of the PLO) and Hamas on particular projects since the Oslo period?

SHY: We are most progressive on women's issues! It is really irresponsible for people to characterize us in this way. And you can talk to my wife! I have been married more than 30 years. I would never tell her not to work, though she prefers not to, she is free to work or to be politically engaged. We [HAMAS] have large numbers of women who ran for office and were elected. We have never imposed the *hijab*. And unlike the PLO, we have women as part of our leadership and on our planning committees.

The young male assistant (who has been taking notes on the meeting) repeats that the secular parties of the PLO never included women in the leadership, and explains that women are active at the university level of the organization, as well.

SZ: But no one has seriously written about the role of women in your organization or your views on gender, so people automatically associate groups who prefer Islamization with the gender attitudes of groups like the Taliban, and don't know the difference.

SHY: We also include Christians on our political [electoral] list. In other words, they run as HAMAS. We have protected the Christians of Ramallah. There was an incident a few years ago when people were attacking some of the Christians here, and HAMAS intervened and stopped all of this.

Regarding Iraq.

SHY: The United States is falling deeper and deeper into the Iraqi abyss. It has spent billions of dollars and will go on spending billions at a time when the American economy is not at all healthy at home. The authorities recently spoke of a U.S. presence in Iraq lasting 12 years. 12 years is impossible! The United States should withdraw immediately and allow the Iraqis to manage their own security situation.

The United States should allow for open, free elections, not restricting participation as in the last election (he is referring to the exclusion of candidates, and lack of Sunni participation). Indeed, they should just disband this current government and elect another.

SZ: The Iraqi forces are not yet ready to defend their own country without assistance. Perhaps by the end of 2006, the border patrol, police, national guard, and military will be in much better shape.

SHY: No, no. In this case, the United States should allow another Arab country to come in [to Iraq] and defend them.

And in response to a question about HAMAS' position vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority in Gaza.

SHY: Yes, there is tension there, but there is also conflict within Israeli society that will be dealt with.

SHY: Thank you very much for the opportunity to share my organization's views with you and we express all hopes for a much better future.

ENDNOTES

1. " Hamas Will Not Join Unity Government," *Al-Jazeera*, July 5, 2005, available in English at <http://english.aljazeera.net>.

2. HAMAS provided a strong challenge to Fatah in the last elections. The Party dominated in the polls in Gaza, but is not as strong in the West Bank where, in the last elections, Fatah received 44.4 percent of the vote (136 seats) to Hamas' 36 percent (or 110) seats.