

INSIDE HAMAS

The Untold Story of
Militants, Martyrs and Spies

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Preface

Tense with anticipation after clearing my luggage with the Jordanian customs, I braced myself for the border crossing ahead. On that sunny May morning in 1998, as I approached Israel for the first time, I was preparing for the inevitable grilling in light of my Palestinian heritage. I boarded one of the ageing buses which ferry passengers at regular intervals between the Jordanian side of the border and the Israeli checkpoint. Glancing around at my fellow passengers as we travelled across no man's land – the narrow King Hussein Bridge separating Jordan from the Israeli border – I noted that the majority of my fellow travellers were Palestinians like me.

Young Israeli soldiers supervised by Israeli intelligence took turns asking the purpose of my journey. As the interrogation wore on, it sunk in that, despite the fact that I was standing in the land of my forefathers, it was I who was the stranger. As I was body-searched, the questions continued. Whom was I going to see? Was I carrying any weapons? Where was I born? I was born in Tyre, just a few miles from Israel's border with south Lebanon. They appeared suspicious of my answers and asked me to wait in the interrogation room while they excused themselves to a side room to confer. Nothing in their attitude reflected the triumph of the signed Oslo Peace Accords, negotiated over a five-year period and which seemed to herald the end of decades of bloodshed, hatred and wars. I was finally given

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permission to enter Israel, not because of my Palestinian background, but thanks to my British passport.

As I emerged on the Israeli side of the border, my first thought was to wonder what ancient secrets the craggy hillsides must hold about this beautiful but troubled land. Driving towards Jerusalem, the often repeated stories of my parents and grandparents as they described their homeland unfolded in front of my eyes. I no longer felt a stranger as the scenery, until now just a mental picture, rolled past the windows. But beyond the fields of my parents' memory were the Jewish settlements. Row upon row of white houses with red rooftops spread along the hilltops like mushrooms, a man-made blot on the natural landscape.

It was with a sense of unreality that I finally arrived in Jerusalem. I had chosen to stay at the American Colony Hotel because it was in East Jerusalem, the Palestinian side of the city. My colleagues had recommended this well-known refuge for foreign correspondents so that I would not feel out of place in the Holy City. I immediately set out to experience Jerusalem with Mohammed Salhab, an old friend who lives within the ancient city walls. He owns an antique shop not far from Al Aqsa mosque, which was top of my list of sites to visit. The third holiest shrine for Muslims worldwide, its modest silver-black dome is almost eclipsed by the golden dome of the Mosque of Omar that dominates the panoramic view of old Jerusalem.

We were soon walking through the narrow alleys lined with tiny shops crammed with spices, brass antiques, silverware and wooden souvenirs. Palestinians dressed in their traditional *galabieh* robes with black-and-white chequered *kofiehs* jostled with guidebook-carrying tourists and Orthodox Jews wearing their distinctive black hats and floor-sweeping coats. A sense of *déjà vu* again washed over me, as these scenes were reminiscent of those described to me so many years ago as a child in Lebanon.

It was Friday, the Muslim holiday, and thousands of Palestinians, young and old, men and woman, had challenged the Israeli measures restricting them from praying at Al Aqsa. As we moved slowly through the crowded alleyways, Mohammed surprised me by picking up every clean newspaper or piece of cardboard he spotted

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on the ground. As we approached the gate which opened into the mosque's courtyard, I was taken aback by the scale of the Israeli military presence: soldiers and police were checking every person who entered. It was then that I learned the purpose of the papers Mohammed had been conscientiously gathering. He spread them on the ground of the courtyard as makeshift prayer mats. Thousands of us would be praying outdoors as every inch of the Mosque's prayer hall was already covered with kneeling worshippers. I thought of my mother and father, whose dream it has always been to pray in the very place I was sitting. So strong is this longing that on the wall of our home back in Burj El Shamali camp in Lebanon there is a three-dimensional model of the Al Aqsa mosque complex and its iconic golden dome. They have not been allowed to visit the country since they fled in 1948. Mohammed, who is married to an English lady and is not very observant in his practice of Islam, explained to me the profound feeling he and many Palestinians like him experience, which brings them here each Friday. It is their way of expressing, at least once a week, that Jerusalem is theirs too and the Israelis cannot ignore them.

My first visit to the Holy Land was to last one month. It was not just a personal pilgrimage; I had been following the Palestinian cause and its leaders around the world for decades. With the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, these leaders had come home and were trying to build their state. For five years, after he had returned from exile in Tunis, the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat encouraged me to visit him at his headquarters in Ramallah and Gaza. Similarly, during telephone interviews I conducted with them from London, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, Hamas' spiritual leader and Dr Abdul Aziz Al Rantisi, a Hamas firebrand and leader, would urge me to come to Gaza. I also wanted to see Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president who was at that time heading the Palestinian negotiating team with Israel. Abbas did his best to convince me to visit my parents' home town in the Galilee, but this was one journey I was not ready to make. I could not go there before a just peace had been achieved.

Shortly after my arrival in Jerusalem, Arafat invited me for lunch in his Ramallah headquarters, housed in the former British mandate

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headquarters which later became those of the Israeli administration in the West Bank. Arafat had made himself very much at home, styling his office in a similar fashion to every other headquarters he had made in exile. A poster of Al Aqsa mosque was behind a desk piled high with papers and faxes, and there was a large table that at every meal would accommodate a number of advisers, petitioners and visitors. Arafat's expression of happiness was unforgettable as he kissed and hugged me warmly and greeted me: 'Welcome to Palestine!'

After lunch we sat and talked in private. He was about to leave for Saudi Arabia for an audience with the late King Fahad, and he asked if I would wait in Gaza until his return forty-eight hours later. It was an experience for me to observe the crowds of Palestinian women who would gather next to his office overlooking Gaza beach to ask for financial assistance or help of other kinds. Arafat was childlike in expressing his enthusiasm for all things Gazan. Born and raised in Gaza, he would say to me things like 'Isn't Gaza's fish the best you have ever tasted in your life?'

I finally came face to face with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Dr Abdul Aziz Al Rantisi, the most influential figure in the Hamas movement at that time and second in command during the Yassin era. When I had only been able to talk to them over the telephone, they had been guarded in their answers but now, on the ground, as I sat in their homes and talked about their plans and goals, they were much more frank and gave me an insight into the underground political organization they were developing.

At the end of my month in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel, I returned to Lebanon. In one day, I travelled through three countries, crossing from Jerusalem to Jordan via the Allenby Bridge and then flying from Amman to Beirut that same afternoon. On the plane back to the Lebanese capital, I reflected on how the reverse journey would be the ultimate dream for my mother Fatima, who today is still living in the refugee camp in southern Lebanon where she was forced to flee to from her village in the Galilee. My welcome back to Burj El Shamali camp where I grew up was overwhelming. It was a little before midnight and my parents couldn't conceive that I was back amongst them, having seen me reporting live just the day

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before from the Gaza Strip. My mother cried uncontrollably when I told her that I had prayed at the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Her wish to pray there before she dies is still unfulfilled.

As I lay in bed that night, I mentally reviewed the experiences of my trip. I had seen at first hand Palestinians living in the camps of the occupied territories, and I found they were just as determined and ready to endure whatever it takes to get their own identity and live in dignity – just as those who live in my family's refugee camp in Lebanon.

Since that first visit to Palestine, I have returned several times. First to cover the suspicious death of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, then the assassinations of both Sheikh Yassin and Dr Abdul Aziz Al Rantisi. I speculated then, as I do now, how much more blood will be shed in order to influence decision-makers to take the difficult steps to bring peace and justice to the Palestinians and peace and security to the Israelis.

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A few blocks down from the White House, in the State Department's Harry S Truman building, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had called an out-of-hours Saturday meeting of her staff.¹ On the agenda was Hamas' surprise landslide victory in the Palestinian national elections. 'Why was it that nobody saw it coming?' Rice asked. Answering her own question, she continued, 'It does say something about us not having a good enough finger on the pulse.' One of her staff said it showed how deep the divisions were between the Palestinians and the Israelis, despite the support and encouragement both had received from the international community to solve their bitter enmity. Fatah, the ruling party which had been dominated by Yasser Arafat's leadership since the 1960s, had been in peace negotiations with Israel for over a decade, yet Palestinians had turned their backs on it, instead casting their vote for Hamas, a party which condoned violence and refused to recognize Israel. The vote was a crystal clear expression of how the Palestinians viewed their traditional political masters. 'I don't know anyone who was not caught off-guard by Hamas' strong showing,' Rice reflected.²

The following day, Rice flew to London for a two-day conference attended by delegates from seventy countries to discuss the situation

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in Afghanistan as well as the Middle East conflict and the emerging tension with Iran. In yet another demonstration of America's failure to keep its finger on the pulse, Rice was heard to comment: 'Some say that Hamas itself was caught off-guard by Hamas' strong showing.'³

But Hamas had not been caught off-guard. In fact many Palestinian commentators were bewildered by the ignorance displayed by Rice and other US officials of the depth of hostility felt by Palestinians towards their own leadership and Israel. Hamas' success can be credited, in some part, to an artfully choreographed strategy of deception.

On the day of the Palestinian elections, 25 January 2006, which saw 1,073,000 Palestinians going to the polls,⁴ I met one of Hamas' top leaders, Dr Mahmud Al Zahar, a physician who was subsequently appointed Foreign Minister in Ismail Haniyeh's Hamas-led government. Over a cup of tea in his house in the centre of Gaza City, Abu Khalid, as he is known, smiled broadly as he told me how Hamas had been well prepared for this so-called shock. In the six months leading up to the elections, the party faithful had worked tirelessly with their activist base to ensure that everyone – including Fatah and Hamas supporters – remained in the dark about their forthcoming victory. Zahar revealed how Hamas voters had been instructed to react if asked about their voting preference. They were advised to avoid the question if possible but, if pressed, they were told to give a misleading response. In this way, the pollsters were tricked months ahead of the election into predicting that Fatah would once again form the next government.

On the eve of the elections, the Israeli army's Chief of Staff, Lt. General Dan Halutz, confidently told the Committee for Foreign Affairs and Security in the Knesset that he expected the Fatah movement to win, but with a small majority. His prediction was based on 'the wise men of Israeli intelligence',⁵ in reference to a special military intelligence department, *Aman*, which, among other things, produces national intelligence estimates and predictions for the Prime Minister and his Cabinet.

The failure to foresee the election's outcome was a huge embarrassment for the intelligence agencies. 'If they don't know

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what's happening in the Palestinian territories, how are we going to rely on them for what's happening in Iran?' asked an editorial in the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*. Looking for a scapegoat, the intelligence outfits targeted Professor Khalil Al Shikaki, a sociologist and specialist in opinion poll surveys, claiming that he had grossly misled them. Not only had the polls carried out by his institute, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR),⁶ misled Israeli intelligence agencies and their government; the views expressed by Shikaki's centre were taken seriously by decision-makers and institutes worldwide, due to his reputation as a respected Palestinian political analyst. Despite being the brother of Fathi Shikaki, the leader of Islamic Jihad, Shikaki doesn't share his brother's extremist views. With degrees from the American University of Beirut and Columbia University, he has for the last decade coordinated his research with organizations such as the Royal Institute for International Affairs in London and the Harry S Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It eventually emerged that information gleaned from the Internet was the main source for Israeli intelligence agencies' analysis of the elections.

After a day spent interviewing party candidates and the electorate on their way to the polls, I drove to my hotel, passing deserted traffic junctions lit with burning car tyres. In the distance, car horns tooted and blared, sounded by supporters and the military wings of both Hamas and Fatah – each of whom were celebrating long before the victor had been declared.

From my room at the Palestine International Hotel overlooking the harbour of Gaza City, I settled down to watch the post-election analysis on television. Late into the night, Shikaki appeared on Al Jazeera in a live interview from Ramallah. 'How did you get it so wrong?' he was bluntly asked. Shikaki appeared embarrassed and hesitant and found difficulty in justifying how his polls had continually misjudged the intentions of the electorate in the months leading up to the elections. In one survey, published on 11 December 2005, he had talked about the rise of Fatah's fortunes. 'The improvement in the popularity of Fatah in the Gaza Strip in the last three months was as a result of the public reception to the

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Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, one month before.’ At that time, he had predicted that Fatah would get fifty per cent of the votes, while Hamas would get thirty-two per cent, with nine per cent going to the other candidates and another nine per cent of the voters undecided. In an earlier public opinion poll, issued by his centre on 25 September 2005, he had predicted that forty-seven per cent would vote for Fatah, thirty-two per cent for Hamas, eleven per cent for ‘others’ and twelve per cent undecided. (He had allowed for a margin of error of three per cent.) Shikaki had expected Fatah to lose about ten per cent of the vote if it failed to choose the right candidates in some of the constituencies but, on the day of the poll, Hamas won more than half the seats while the previous ruling party, Fatah, managed just one third. The final result: 74 of the 132 seats in the Palestine Legislative Council went to Hamas, while 45 went to Fatah.

Nine months earlier, following a three-day round of talks in Cairo attended by delegations from thirteen Palestinian factions, the Hamas delegates had declared their intention to take part in the forthcoming election process. They had previously boycotted the 1996 elections in protest at the Oslo Peace Accords signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) with the Israeli government. Mainstream groups like Fatah interpreted Hamas’ about-turn as a *de facto* acceptance of the Oslo agreements and a climbdown from their position concerning Israel’s right to exist.

After their return to Gaza from Cairo, Hamas leaders appointed a campaign team drawn from experts in communications, sociology, politics, and economics – covering every sector which affects society and the Palestinian way of life. The Islamic University in Gaza became the nerve centre for their election strategy. One of their first tasks was to divide voters into three categories: supporters, waverers and rivals. The waverers received maximum attention because Hamas strategists believed that the majority of voters fell into this camp. Their ploy was not necessarily to convince them to accept Hamas’ policies but to highlight the inadequacies of their opponents. By exploiting Fatah’s previous history of bad governance, corruption and failure to achieve any real progress in its negotiations with Israel, they duly persuaded sufficient numbers of waverers to

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vote for the Hamas candidate. One group Hamas worked hard to lure was the young. Again they used the record of the Fatah government on issues relating to high unemployment, the poor economic situation, corruption and the need for transparency in government to convince them to vote for change. Women waverers were particularly vulnerable to Hamas' tactics at a time when the Gaza Strip was blighted by kidnapping and violence.

In choosing a slogan for the election list, Hamas was careful to avoid anything which hinted at its military agenda, settling instead for an upbeat rallying cry which translated as 'For Change and Reform!' Hamas was now the voice of social concern. They would change people's lives. In order to woo the Palestinian vote, they omitted any reference to their ambitions to destroy Israel, even hinting at a measured rapprochement. 'We won't rule out negotiations with the Jewish State,' said the group's number two candidate, Sheikh Mohammed Abu Teir, in an interview outside Jerusalem's Al Aqsa Mosque. 'Israel and a future Palestinian state could live side by side.' At least for a generation or two, he qualified. I was reminded of something the late Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, had told me ten years earlier. In the presence of Ismail Haniyeh, he told me that Hamas was prepared to negotiate a truce as a long-term solution to the conflict with Israel but he felt it would be impossible to sustain. He preferred to leave the dilemma to future generations when the current old vanguard of fighters and politicians had died off to be replaced by younger blood. With his impish smile, he said his instinct predicted that the Jewish State would no longer exist in three decades.

Hamas wasted no opportunity convincing the wavering voters to place their X with the Hamas candidate on election day. They targeted mosques, family contacts, neighbours, schools and workplaces. On the media front, a Hamas spokesperson was always made available to answer journalists' requests for interviews, provide background information or accompany them on the campaign tour. These requests were given priority according to the importance of each TV channel or publication and its audience reach. If there was to be a radio or TV debate between Hamas candidates and their rivals, such was their media savvy that Hamas officials would

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negotiate with the producers to be the first to start the debate and be given the final word.

It is unclear how much Hamas invested financially to achieve its triumph. Their Fatah rivals gave me figures ranging from \$22 million to \$30 million. The official figure given to me by the Election Commission was \$3 million. Their political rallies in Gaza City were attended by tens of thousands. Programmes informing the public of these rallies were distributed well in advance from mosques, libraries, schools and universities. They were aired over local radio stations or posted on the Internet, which became one of Hamas' strongest weapons of communication. Their rallies were peaceful and slick. On election day, there were marshals to organize the traffic and marshals to control the crowds. All their campaign workers were given sandwiches and cold drinks to sustain them through the day.

The count was still in progress in the early hours of the following morning when I telephoned the constituency office of Fatah's rising star, Mohammed Dahlan, to enquire about the results. I was told by a member of his staff that Dahlan was already holding a meeting in his Khan Younis constituency and suggested I go there. By the time I arrived in Gaza's second largest city, convoys of cars, open-topped trucks and buses were converging from nearby Rafiah and the outer fringes of Khan Younis to celebrate Fatah's victor in the movement's stronghold. They must have been relying on exit poll predictions delivered by pollsters including Shikaki, whom TV stations such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabia and western news networks were authoritatively quoting. A casually dressed Mohammed Dahlan was following the news while fielding a plethora of congratulatory calls from all over the Palestinian territories. He calmly tried to curb their enthusiasm, asking people to be patient and wait for the official results. He then decided to take a drive around the streets of Khan Younis to experience for himself the mood of the electorate and asked me to accompany him. Mohammed's distinctive convoy was recognized by passers-by, whom he saluted in response as we drove to Al Amal Hospital, where he had set up an office for his election campaign team.

Dahlan, who was sceptical about the accuracy of opinion polls, was the only politician I encountered throughout the election period

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who refused to depend on independent polls. He preferred to rely on the research of his campaign team, each working independently of one another to analyse voter preferences. His workers found a conflicting picture developing to that being offered by the opinion polls. Dahlan began to receive worrying news that large numbers of the Palestinian police and security services had voted in favour of Hamas. His advisers predicted that at least forty per cent of these civil servants attached to the Palestinian Authority had voted for Hamas, which dramatically swung the results in favour of his rivals. Dahlan, who had by now realized that his movement's chances of victory were fading, pleaded with his callers to allow a peaceful transfer of power if Hamas won the election. Despite the movement's failure, Dahlan, together with one other Fatah candidate, Sofyan Al Agha, guaranteed his seat and secured the largest number of votes in his constituency with 38,349 votes, just ahead of his closest rival, Younis Al Astal of Hamas, who gained 37,695 votes.⁷ Another factor contributing to Fatah's downfall was the defection by large numbers of its candidates who had failed to secure a place on the Fatah election list and had stood as independents. The votes lost by Fatah to these independents were significant.

Hamas' strong showing in cities like Gaza, Ramallah and even the historically Christian town of Bethlehem was considered a protest vote against Fatah rather than mass solidarity for Hamas. Although recognition of Israel by the Palestinian Authority had improved the image of Palestinians in the international arena, the quality of life for families living in the West Bank and Gaza was worse than it had been before 1993, when Israeli soldiers withdrew from the main Palestinian cities and the Palestinian Authority began what was intended to be self-rule.

During Israel's weekly Cabinet meeting on Sunday 29 January 2006, directly following the Palestinian elections, the following Cabinet Communique was issued:

Acting Prime Minister Olmert said: 'As soon as the results of the PA elections became known, I consulted with various elements in order to analyse the new situation that has been created. Following these consultations, we announced that the State of Israel will not

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negotiate with any Palestinian administration even part of which is composed of an armed terrorist organization that calls for the destruction of the State of Israel. This position has won admiration in both Israel and around the world to the best of our knowledge. It has also met with the widespread agreement and understanding of almost all international elements. At the same time, we announced that Israel would continue to act against terrorism everywhere, at any time; there is no intention to compromise on these matters.’

Ehud Olmert had taken over up reins of government while Ariel Sharon lay in a coma in a Jerusalem hospital, felled by a stroke just two months after leaving the hardline Likud Party to form a party of his own which he called Kadima, a Hebrew word for ‘Forward’. Olmert was aiming to win the Israeli elections a month later by garnering support from the full Kadima slate and those Likud and Labour figures who had defected to Sharon’s new party. Olmert had to walk a fine line following Hamas’ rise to power between Sharon’s new centrist approach, while talking tough in refusing to deal with a Hamas government whose commitment was to destroy Israel. The former hardliner Sharon’s new popular centrist party was built around the notion that Israel’s security would be best assured not through endless and fruitless negotiations with the Palestinians, but by disengaging from them altogether on Israel’s own terms.

Hamas’ victory had an enormous impact on the campaigning in the Israeli election, with opposition politicians pouring scorn on the government for failing to prevent the Islamic movement’s rise to prominence. ‘We are talking about an earthquake that has sent us back fifty years and will lead the entire region into chaos,’ warned Silvan Shalom,⁸ a member of the Knesset from the hawkish Likud Party who resigned as Foreign Minister in anticipation of the 28 March elections.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the former Prime Minister and leader of the Likud Party, argued that ‘Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza boosted Hamas’ victory’ because ‘it could claim that terror works.’ He called on Israeli leaders to ‘stop any further withdrawals and move the barrier eastward and deeper into Palestinian land if Hamas sticks to its radical agenda’. Less than a day after the official announcement

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of the results, relatives of some of the hundreds of Hamas' bombing victims descended on a café in the centre of Jerusalem which had itself been hit by a suicide bomber in 2002. Eli Cohen, the coffee shop owner, said that 'Palestinians had merely exercised their right to throw out an incompetent, corrupt government. They think that Hamas will do better. Not for the terror. This is my opinion. I don't think they vote for the terror. I think they vote for their jobs and food and the kids.' Erik Ascherman, from Rabbis for Human Rights said: 'We also share responsibility for what happened and still have some hope that maybe Hamas will decide they must now be politicians, diplomats, states-people and not terrorists.'⁹

Some Israeli political analysts called on their government to take advantage of the moral odium surrounding Hamas – at least in western political circles – to bolster the image of the Jewish State, which had become tarnished after decades of criticism over its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and their ongoing construction of a concrete barrier known as the 'apartheid wall' or 'Berlin Wall' by Palestinians and the 'separation fence' by the Israelis. The fence, expected to extend to 650 kilometres and a height of up to eight metres, places the Palestinians in a stranglehold, annexing farmers from their land, businessmen from their premises, families from one another and cutting off many from access to water.

Following my tour of the polling stations of the Gaza Strip and especially in Gaza City, I had speculated on the scale of support for the Hamas movement. The city has its share of well-off citizens and certain families are known for their taste for the good life, enjoying evenings out at the many restaurants and coffee shops which have flourished in the micro-economic boom of Gaza City, while the rest of the territory crumbles into abject poverty. Palestinians from the Diaspora had had high hopes following the Oslo and Washington peace accords with Israel in 1993 and 1994 and returned to the Palestinian Territories. Most of the returnees were members of the PLO and it didn't seem to matter whether they were high- or low-ranking members, their lifestyles exceeded those of many of their fellow Palestinians back in Gaza and the West Bank. They added another tier to the class system and were described by local Gazans as *Al Aedoun*, which literally means 'the returnee' but has connotations

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of 'nouveau riche'. The Al A'adeen had grown accustomed to the trappings of wealth and a way of life which bore no comparison to life in the territories. But back in the territories there were no houses and apartments of the standard they were accustomed to, so they began to build grandiose villas or six-storey apartment blocks. The camp refugees, so unaccustomed to the sight of such luxury, referred to these apartments as 'the Towers', whose owners drove around in Mercedes cars or the latest 4x4 jeeps which put them totally at odds with the rest of the Palestinian population. This cultural divide was seized on by Hamas and its followers and used to criticize the PLO and its officials of corruption and the vulgar misappropriation of money intended for its poor citizens. One city resident told me, 'We want to teach them [Fatah] a lesson so that they will not ignore us in the future. We don't believe in Hamas' political views, but we want to show the Fatah leadership that we have alternatives, and if they want to make a comeback they have to consider our views and respect us as voters.'

I had lunch with Ismail Haniyeh at his home in Al Shati camp the day after the election following an invitation from his son. Despite the clear blue sky, sunlight barely penetrated the densely packed houses of the refugee camp. By the time I arrived, hundreds of well-wishers, including a large contingent of Ez Ed Din Al Qassam fighters, were winding their way through the narrow alleyways towards Haniyeh's house. The sounds of victory songs and gunshots punctuated the air, competing with the high-pitched ululating of the camp's elderly women – a tradition in the Middle East during times of joy and sadness. One of the black-clad women, a close neighbour of Haniyeh, told me: 'Abu Al Abed [Haniyeh's familiar name] is a good leader. We feel safe in his hands.'

Forging my way through the joyous crowds, I found Abed waiting for me outside the metal gates leading to their two-storey house. Haniyeh's elder brother, also known as Abu Al Abed, was visiting and I congratulated him on his brother's list victory as he offered me some Arabic sweets in welcome while we waited for Ismail who was giving thanks at the mosque. People of all ages and walks of life lined up outside the house to offer their congratulations and I was surprised to see amongst them high-ranking Palestinian police

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officers and civil servants. It was proof that Hamas had support even from the Palestinian Authority. By their easy conversation, it appeared they were continuing a dialogue which was established long before election day. It was then that I fully understood to what degree the hopes of the Fatah candidates and their leadership had been dashed. It was taken for granted that the majority of Palestinian Police – which number more than 80,000, together with those working for the different security organizations, not forgetting their families – would automatically vote for Fatah. As it turned out, at least forty per cent of these cast their votes for Hamas.

The buzz travelling through Ismail Haniyeh's house that morning was inevitably about their victory. Haniyeh's eldest brother was keen to engage me in conversation, telling me about the hard work invested by his brother to achieve his success and that he had no concerns about forming an alliance with others to appoint a government. Manoeuvring his way through the throng of TV cameras, Ismail finally returned home looking every inch the statesman with his embroidered brown *abaya*, short-trimmed beard and a white scarf to keep out the January chill despite the sunny weather. In no time a tent was erected and chairs laid out to act as an alternative reception room to his home, which was unable to accommodate the swell of well-wishers. After apologizing for his delay, he reminded me of our first meeting back in 1996, which had taken place at Sheikh Yassin's house. Haniyeh's habitual calm manner made him the natural first choice as the new leader of Hamas. He had no history of confrontation with other Palestinian leaders and he spoke deferentially towards Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen), whom he referred to as 'the President'. He told me, 'We in Hamas only took it [victory] for granted when Abu Mazen himself announced that Hamas had won the election.' The first to call and congratulate him on his movement's victory from Fatah was Hussein Al Sheikh, a senior member of the party in Ramallah in the West Bank.

Despite his hectic day, the new leader of Hamas insisted that my cameraman and I share lunch with him and his son and brother, ordering a takeaway version of a celebratory meal of chicken and rice. Over lunch, Haniyeh outlined his vision for the future of

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his government and expressed his relief and happiness about the smooth running of the election, which won praise around the world, including from former US President Jimmy Carter, who was in charge of the foreign observer team.

By the early hours of 26 January, it was all over for Fatah. The extent of their loss was devastating. Calls went unanswered. Mobiles were switched off. It wasn't until the early afternoon that they started waking up to the many questions they had to answer, from their families, friends, followers and sympathizers, regarding their performance as guardians of the national cause.

As evening fell, Fatah's military wing was unable to contain its anger. Fatah militiamen took to the streets of Gaza and Ramallah, directing their ire towards the skies with hundreds of rounds of machine-gun fire and accompanied by chants calling for their leaders to be held accountable for the defeat. Dahlan's phone was ringing incessantly. He was the only Fatah leader left holding things together, at least in the Gaza Strip. After answering calls from Mahmoud Abbas and talking to other senior Fatah leaders, against his advisers' wishes, Dahlan took the decision to face the fury after watching what appeared to be alarming television images showing members of Fatah's militias occupying the offices of the Legislative Council. Some news channels were even suggesting civil war brewing. Dahlan, who is considered enemy number one amongst Hamas followers because of his popularity within his own party and for his tough rhetoric against Hamas, succeeded in defusing the situation after promising the Fatah fighters that whoever was responsible for Fatah's defeat would indeed be held accountable. Magnanimously, he also called on them to respect the democratic and fair elections which had brought his rivals to power.

Of the other political factions, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) founded by George Habash won three seats; the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) led by Nayef Hawatmeh, the Third Way, a newly launched independent movement led by Salam Fayyad, a former World Bank official, and Hanan Ashrawi, an ex-minister and spokeswoman for the Palestinian Authority, and Dr Mustafa Barghouti, a principled advocate of non-violence who stood as an independent candidate of

Choreographed Victory

Independent Palestine, won two seats apiece and the Independents won four. Other Palestinian factions failed to earn a place in the Legislative Council, particularly those who had been active on the political scene since the 1960s, such as the Palestinian National Front (PNF) led by Samir Ghouseh.

I was not surprised by the poor performance of these decades-old factions. Growing up in Burj Al Shamali, a refugee camp close to the city of Tyre in Southern Lebanon, my experience of these factions was that they were on the far left of the Palestinian political movement with sympathies more in line with Marxism. Some refugee camps were represented by several different movements and their individual camp headquarters were decorated with iconic photographs of Che Guevara or pictures of Lenin and Mao Tse-tung. Moscow was the focus for their ideology and we used to have a saying that 'if it was cloudy in Moscow, it would rain over their camp headquarters.' Many Palestinians studied or received military training in Russia, Cuba and China and would bring back literature which took pride of place in their particular factions' HQs. The Little Red Book in Arabic would be propped up against works of Lenin and Marx while the floors would be littered with magazines from Russia containing articles written in Russian and Arabic. Refugees in general were not in favour of their left-leaning politics. They were more concerned about adequate sanitation, improving their cramped housing conditions and eking out the little money they earned from poorly paid seasonal agricultural work. These factions had to work hard to attract followers, managing to a certain degree by providing some social activities in order to draw young kids and women to attend their functions and training courses.

But their time had passed. That was obvious in the early hours of 26 January 2006, as a surging tide of rippling green was the sight greeting anyone out on the streets. Flags and banners bearing the slogan 'Islam Is the Solution', baseball caps and scarves, cardboard Islamic crescents and sweat shirts, weaved and waved in the united colour of victory: green for Hamas. Despite the crowds and the unexpected outcome of the election, no violent incidents were reported that day. Even the burning car tyres outside my hotel, which would normally signify trouble, were shrugged off by the

Inside Hamas

receptionist at the front desk as ‘just Hamas celebrating’.

In stark contrast, I visited friends in a known Fatah stronghold in Al Zahraa, a suburb of Gaza. There was absolute silence. The streets were deserted. Dr Zahar had warned me that not only was Hamas planning to win the majority of seats, but they intended to leave Fatah activists with a sense of shame and embarrassment. Only hours before, Fatah supporters had been driving around Gaza City in large convoys, car horns blaring and giant-sized yellow flags waving in euphoric anticipation. They had prepared only for victory. The bubble had burst and the atmosphere plummeted into one of mourning. A sense of foreboding about the future hung in the air.