



What is Hamas and how did it emerge?

Hamas is an Islamist Palestinian political party with a military wing. Hamas is the acronym for Harakat Al-Mouqawama Al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement), and also means “enthusiasm” in Arabic.

Hamas’s precursor, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), disagreed with the secularism of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), dominated by the Fatah party and led by Yasser Arafat. It also initially disagreed with the PLO’s recourse to violence after Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. The Palestinian MB focussed on cultural and religious activities and providing social services and was therefore initially tolerated, and to some extent even encouraged, by the Israeli government, which hoped it would be more pliant than the PLO, which it sought to crush and discredit. Gaza’s number of mosques tripled from 200 in 1967 to 600 in 1987.^{1,2}

Hamas was founded in 1987, during the first Palestinian *intifada*, a general uprising against the occupation. Hamas’s spiritual leader, Ahmed Yassin—paraplegic since 12 and nearly blind—wished to position Hamas as a protagonist in the uprising. Like most people in Gaza, he and his family had fled there after their communities of origin were razed by Jewish militias as the State of Israel was established. Yassin’s experiences, hopes and vulnerability thus resonated with many Palestinians.

What are Hamas’s primary goals?

Hamas’s goals have evolved substantially over the years. Its founding Charter advocated, among other things, the establishment of an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine, the application of Sharia Law and the destruction of the State of Israel. However, since 2004, many Hamas leaders have repeatedly offered to accept a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict based on the pre-1967 borders. Hamas’ current priorities are to end the occupation, protect the right of Palestinian refugees to return, and seek the liberation of Palestinian prisoners. Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal indicated to Carter Center senior advisor Robert Pastor that the Charter is “a piece of history and no longer relevant, but cannot be changed for internal reasons.” Pastor has asserted that those who quote the Charter rather than

Hamas’s more recent stances do so to justify ignoring Hamas.³

How does Hamas operate?

Hamas provides health care, education, social services and humanitarian relief needed by Palestinians. It also promotes its interpretation of Islam. It strongly challenges the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian lands seized in 1967 and Israel’s ongoing illegal appropriation of Palestinian land (e.g. “the settlements”). Key developments reveal its evolution:

- 1989: Hamas carries out its first attack on Israeli troops, killing two soldiers.⁴
- 1991: Hamas establishes its military wing, Iz al-Din al-Qassam.
- 1993: Hamas opposes the Oslo Accords, refusing to participate in peace negotiations as long as Israel occupies the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas begins attacks, including suicide bombings, on Israeli occupation forces and settlers in the West Bank.
- 1994: Hamas begins suicide bombings within Israel two months after the February 25 massacre by a US-born Jewish-Israeli in Hebron, West Bank, which killed 29 Palestinians and wounded another 125.⁵
- 2001-02: Suicide bombings by Hamas and others peak
- 2003-2006: Hamas greatly reduces suicide bombings in 2003, and in 2005 halts the practice, but continues using sporadic indiscriminate rocket-fire, generally non-lethal, to retaliate against Israeli abuses.
- January 2004: Yassin offers to end armed resistance and senior Hamas official Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi offers a long-term truce, if Israel ends its occupation of the territories captured in 1967.⁶
- March 2004: Israeli military assassinates Yassin; 200,000 Palestinians attend his funeral.⁷
- April 2004: Israeli military assassinates al-Rantissi.
- 2005: Despite boycotting previous Palestinian elections, Hamas participates in the 2005 municipal elections. It wins over a third of municipal councils, including large urban centres, displacing Fatah, and does surprisingly well even in the secular West Bank.⁸
- 2006: Hamas drops its call for the destruction of Israel from its electoral platform, and wins the internationally supervised Palestinian legislative council elections: 74 of 132 seats and 44.45 percent of the popular vote. The ruling Fatah party wins just

45 seats and 36.96 percent of the popular vote.⁹ Hamas member Ismail Haniyeh, the newly elected prime minister, writes to the US and Israel offering a long-term truce and acceptance of a border on the lines of the pre-1967 borders. Neither the US nor Israel ever responds.¹⁰

- 2006: US officials press Fatah to pull out of the unity government, promising military aid to quell any backlash.¹¹ Hamas-Fatah tensions and violence escalate, as Fatah commanders refuse to take orders from the Hamas-led cabinet.
- December 15, 2006: President Mahmoud Abbas calls for another general election. Hamas challenges the legality of holding early elections and insists on the right of the elected Legislative Council to serve out its full term. The same day Palestinian National Security Forces fire on a Hamas rally in Ramallah and Fatah troops try to assassinate Prime Minister Haniyeh (Hamas).
- December 2006 – June 2007: Intense factional fighting continues. Human Rights Watch accuses both sides of violating their rivals' human rights. On June 14, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announces the dissolution of the unity government and declares a state of emergency. Abbas dismisses Prime Minister Haniyeh and begins ruling Gaza and the West Bank by presidential decree. Hamas accuses Abbas of in effect staging a coup against the elected government, and responds by taking over Gaza. Hamas has governed Gaza ever since.

How much support does Hamas now have, and how strong is it militarily?

Hamas' popularity skyrocketed after Israeli summer 2014 assault: According to polling cited by the *Jerusalem Post*, 61 percent of Palestinian potential voters would support Hamas's Ismael Haniyeh, versus 32 percent for Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas. In Gaza, 53 percent support Haniyeh; in the West Bank the figure jumps to 66 percent.¹²

Military strength: Hamas does not release figures on the size of its military wing. In 2009, the International Crisis Group estimated that the Qassam Brigades had 7,000 to 10,000 full-time members with a reserve of 20,000 soldiers. IHS Jane's listed Hamas as having 13,000 well-trained and well-equipped personnel in September 2013.¹³ Hamas manufactures much of its own weaponry, using home-made ingredients, but also imports limited numbers of long-range rockets, allegedly from Iran.

Why do many Palestinians support Hamas?

Chief factors boosting Hamas's degree of support are:

- A desire to resist Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, in place since 1967, and the illegal appropriation of Palestinian land.
- Poverty and malnutrition due to blockade of Gaza
- Disenchantment with Fatah
- Hamas' ability to confront technically superior Israeli occupation forces, despite limited resources.
- Fatah's failure to end foreign meddling and improve living conditions.

Does Hamas respect human rights?

Hamas's human rights record is mixed. Hamas has frequently engaged in tit-for-tat killings of political rivals. Hamas has also often summarily executed people suspected of collaboration with the Israeli military.

Although individual Hamas members have at times pressured women to wear hijab, Hamas leaders state this is not its policy. Hamas respects the rights of the Christian minority living in Gaza: their churches operate openly and many Christians work in the Hamas government. Hamas has vocally condemned ISIS for atrocities; ISIS considers Hamas "apostate" and an enemy.

Hamas' leaders have at times justified targeting Israeli civilians, arguing in 2000 that Israeli settlers are aggressors not unlike soldiers, and that due to Israel's militarization and mandatory conscription, all Israelis are soldiers. (Nonetheless, it has killed far fewer civilians than the Israeli military has.) Some Hamas figures still indulge in Holocaust denial and other manifestations of anti-Semitism. However, at least one has described the Holocaust as a crime against humanity. Khaled Mashaal recently said Hamas's battle is with "occupiers", not Jews per se.

¹ Higgins, Andrew. "How Israel Helped to Spawn Hamas". Wall Street Journal. January 24, 2009.

² Kamel, Lorenzo. "Why do Palestinians in Gaza support Hamas?". Haaretz. August 5, 2014.

³ Adas, Jane. "Mazin Qumsiyeh on the History and Practice Of Nonviolent Palestinian Resistance". Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. May-June 2010.

⁴ Yassin was arrested and sentenced to life in prison; 400 Hamas activists were deported to Israeli-occupied South Lebanon.

⁵ According to an LA Times article, Rabbi Yaacov Perrin told mourners that even 1 million Arabs "are not worth a Jewish fingernail."

⁶ "Running out of time". Al-Ahram Weekly. January 29 – February 4, 2004

⁷ "Hamas chief killed in air strike." BBC News. March 22, 2004

⁸ Price, Matthew. "Hamas success in Fatah heartland". BBC News. May 13, 2005.

⁹ Central Electoral Council. Final Results, Palestinian Legislative Council.

¹⁰ Kamel, Lorenzo.Ibid.

¹¹ "The Proof Is in the Paper Trail". Vanity Fair. March 5, 2008.

¹² "Hamas's Haniyeh would trounce Abbas if elections held today, Palestinian poll says" Jerusalem Post. September 3, 2014.

¹³ Bender, Jeremy. "Hamas' Armed Wing Numbers In The Tens Of Thousands, And It's Ready For A Long Conflict". Business Insider. July 31, 2014