

Distorting Hamas's Origins: A Response to Mehdi Hasan

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On February 14, 1988, Israeli agents planted a car bomb that killed 3 Palestinian leaders in Cyprus, bringing Fatah's Student Brigade to an end. The victims, Mohammad Hassan Buhais (known as Abu Hasan Qassem), Marwan Kayyali, and Mohammad Basim Al-Tamimi, were the leaders of a student branch of Fatah that emerged as a Marxist-Maoist movement aimed at uniting Arab revolutionaries for the cause of Palestine. However, shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and years of internal evaluation and intellectual debate, the organization embraced Islamism. This ideological transformation, influenced by Palestinian intellectuals like Mounir Chafiq, a Christian Marxist who later converted to Islam, marked the inauguration of a new era in which Islam, as a guiding framework and source of inspiration, played a primary role in the popular struggle against Israel.

The creation, transformation, and end of the Student Brigade motivated Islamists in Palestine to openly resist Western imperialism—the most immediate manifestation of which was the Israeli colonization of Palestine. Arguably, Hizbullah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas owe much of their creation to the intellectual discourse of the Student Brigade. In fact, Hizbullah's late top leader Imad Mughniyah was an active member of this movement.

This Monday, however (a few days after the 30th anniversary of the assassination of Buhais, Kayyali, and Al-Tamimi), journalist Mehdi Hasan, in his [latest episode](#) of “Blowback” on *The Intercept*, claimed that Hamas, or the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, was a creation of Israel. In this account, Israel spent more than 20 years funding and creating Hamas to undermine prominent nationalist Palestinian factions, particularly Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. This article argues that Hasan's narrative is not only an impetuous and intellectually dishonest account of a complicated history, but also conceptually flawed. By presenting Islamists as terrorist fanatics created by the very enemy they are fighting, Hasan effaces the crucial role of Islamists in the movement against Israeli colonization, and understates their popular support. Elementary knowledge of the history of the Palestinian cause and Islamism in the Middle East refutes these hasty claims.

Hasan draws from conventional interpretations of “Islamic radicalism”—imbued with liberal assumptions and shaped by the discourse of the War on Terror—to approach the relationship between Hamas and Israel. By arguing that Islamic militant groups emerged as “blowback” or mere responses to dictatorial repression, he represents secularist and nationalist leaders' turn to Islamism as psychological responses to tyranny, stripping Muslims of any intellectual capacity to embrace Islam as a guiding framework for political struggle.

The Role of Islamists in the Anti-Colonial Movement

Not only does Hasan ignore the detailed history of Islamist participation in the Palestinian resistance movement since the Sykes-Picot Agreement, he also effaces the political engagement and struggle of thousands of Palestinian Muslims who were not affiliated with

any ideological factions before and after the formation of the secularist Fatah or the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Beyond the classic role of Islamic scholars like Grand Mufti Amin Al-Husseini, who led the fight against the British and early Zionist colonization of Palestine, other Islamic preachers like Izz Ad-Din Al-Qassam formed armed militias that assumed the Islamic concept of Defensive Jihad as the ideological framework for their armed struggle against foreign occupation. Al-Qassam—originally from Syria—actively recruited men and women from mosque minbars to become part of the armed struggle against British colonialism. Further, the very name of Hamas's military wing, Al-Qassam Brigades, is a small testament to Islamists' role in internationalizing the Palestinian cause beyond its borders, given that Al-Qassam was Syrian by nationality.

In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is a Palestinian branch, did not just send volunteers from Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq to the Arab Liberation Army in the 1948 War; it also sent militias to fight Zionist occupation in Yafa, Jerusalem, and Gaza under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, after the Arab defeat in 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood expanded its activities in Gaza, recruiting new members to lead the resistance against Israel including Khalil Al-Wazir, who later co-founded Fatah, and Khairy Al-Agha, who later co-founded Hamas. Later, these Muslim Brotherhood fighters in Gaza underwent training by Abdel Moneim Abdel Raouf, co-founder of the Free Officers Movement in Egypt and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The activism of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza continued in the post-1948 era through 1954, when Gamal Abdel Nasser launched a crackdown against the organization, imprisoning and killing many of its leaders, and forcing Muslim Brotherhood committees in Gaza underground. In response, Khalil Al-Wazir recruited influential Muslim Brotherhood members to form a new nationalist organization that lacked an overtly Islamic identity. Among those recruited were future Fatah leaders such as Mohammad Yousef Al-Najjar, Salah Khalaf, and Kamal Adwan. In this sense, one could situate the roots of the 'secular' Fatah movement in the Muslim Brotherhood, and argue that it was Fatah—not Hamas—that emerged in response to dictatorial political repression.

The Roots of Hamas

While Hasan's video showcases Yasser Arafat's charismatic 1974 "The Gun and the Olive Branch" speech at the UN General Assembly, it describes Yassin as a "half-blind" and "disabled" Palestinian cleric, "empowered" by the Israeli right-wing. This insidious comparison—between the 'peaceful' secularist and the 'radical' Islamist who suffers from psychological and physical illness—is a classic orientalist trope with a long history in popular media.

Hamas is not only a Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood focused on charity, education, and the building of social institutions; it is a movement grounded in Islamic imperatives, created to center armed resistance against the Israeli occupation. Providing little political-historical context, however, Hasan suggests that Israel "encouraged" the proliferation of Islamists in Gaza, and turned a blind eye to their activities in order to "divide and rule" the Palestinians. This elides the fact that Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and his companions who founded Hamas were not foreigners to their communities or, in Hasan's words, "a bunch of fringe Palestinian Islamists." Rather, they were prominent local leaders who fought for the well-being of their people for decades prior to the formal inception of Hamas.

For instance, in the late 1970s, before the official creation of Hamas, Islamists in Gaza and the West Bank mobilized students on university campuses and formed the Islamic Palestine Bloc. This generated friction and confrontations between them and students loyal to Fatah and the PFLP. Israeli authorities identified this as an opportunity to exacerbate divisions among the student body (Fatah and the PFLP were already struggling with a number of internal contestations), and mistakenly assumed that the new Islamic movement would propagate apolitical notions of Islamic practice rather than prove a security threat to the Israeli state.

What Hasan failed to mention is that soon after Israeli authorities observed Islamist involvement in armed resistance in 1983, the occupation forces imprisoned Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, along with dozens of prominent Hamas leaders for their role in forming armed militias. It was only through the 1985 Jibril Agreement, which facilitated a prisoners exchange between Palestinian factions and Israel, that Yassin was released. However, two years after he founded Hamas in 1987, Yassin—along with a number of top Hamas leaders—was again captured in an attempt to curtail Islamists' strong presence in the First Palestinian Intifada. While military courts sentenced Yassin to life in prison, he was released once more in 1997—the product of a deal between Jordan and Israel, forged after Mossad agents' failed attempt to assassinate Hamas leader Khaled Mashal in Amman. Given that Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, spent the majority of Hamas's formative years in prison, is it reasonable to claim, as Hasan does, that Israel “empowered” such Islamists to undermine the leadership of Arafat and Fatah? And, if as Hasan asserts, Israel patiently spent two decades building and creating Hamas, why did it imprison and assassinate Yassin's companions as early as the 1980s?

Hasan also understates the pivotal role Islamists in the diaspora and West Bank played in the anti-colonial movement. It was Palestinian members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait who formed the core group of Hamas founders in the diaspora. And long before that, as early as the 1960s, Islamists participated in Fatah's armed training camps in Jordan (known as “Sheikhs camps”). In fact, it was in Jordan over a decade later that Khaled Mashal and his companions organized a 1984 conference that inaugurated the official formation of a unified Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was to foreground the decolonization of Palestine. In short, Hamas did not arbitrarily emerge in Gaza with the blessing of Israel; the organization was an outcome of a systematic process involving years of planning, preparation, internal evaluation, and strategizing. It was the fruit of years of progress and investment by the Muslim Brotherhood aimed at countering Western hegemony in the Middle East.

Life Under Military Occupation

Not only does Hasan misrepresent Islamists themselves, he also fails to contextualize the testimonies of Israeli officials. For example, in “How Israel Helped to Spawn Hamas,” Avner Cohen’s testimony in the *Wall Street Journal*, Cohen asserts that Israel was responsible for the creation of Hamas insofar as it did not successfully “curb Gaza's Islamists from the outset.” Cohen also criticizes Israel for trying to exploit the rise of Hamas to undermine Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In addition to pressuring the PLO and Yasser Arafat in the secret negotiations that culminated in the Oslo Accords, Israel treated the rise of Hamas as a new opportunity to undermine the Palestinian cause through the deployment of anti-Islamist rhetoric—a rare moment of attentiveness towards the ideology of a Palestinian resistance group. In short, Cohen’s depiction of Hamas as “Israel's creation” was not meant literally. Rather, he was sharing frustration over Israel’s reluctance to eliminate Islamists altogether, outside the legal-political parameters of international diplomacy.

Hasan’s video also obfuscates the disparities in power between colonizer and colonized. Israeli settler-colonial power requires the systematic surveillance, disciplining, and control of Palestinian life through institutional regulation. Mosques, schools, universities, and hospitals all require formal Israeli recognition through colonial registration, without which they run the risk of being shut down. For example, in 1979-80, after years of attacks and harassment by state forces, Islamists in Gaza were pressured to register Al-Mujamaa Al-Islami, a community center with a clinic, kindergarten, schools for young men and women, and a library. Despite such Israeli techniques of colonial management, Islamists were able to establish institutions like the Islamic University of Gaza, which serves more than 20,000 Palestinian students. This political dynamism demonstrates that Islamists have been effective not only in their military and political resistance to Israeli settler-colonialism, but also in re-building and maintaining Palestinian social and ethical infrastructures.

It is also important to note that Israeli domination involves the regulation of Palestinian civil society itself, which is forced to depend on the legal “support” of its occupying power. Hasan fails to realize that according to International Law, Geneva Conventions, and

Occupation Law, Palestinian civilian life is technically the sole responsibility of occupying authorities. But when it comes to Israel's alleged financial support to Hamas, Hasan cites sources who themselves do not even claim to have sent direct funds to Hamas. The vague testimonies Hasan provides point only to Israel's detailed and totalizing control of Palestinian civil society. For Hasan though, these anecdotes are enough "evidence" to portray Hamas as a creation and production of Israel.

Conclusion

Perhaps in the noble effort to defend Muslims against charges of terrorism, Mehdi Hasan presents a fragmented and cherry-picked political account that distorts the rich, ongoing history of Islamist resistance to Israeli occupation. His impoverished historical analysis not only paints a simplistic picture of collusion between Islamists and Western imperialists, but also obfuscates Israel's leading role in the global War on Terror, which specifically targets Islamists in our present moment. While—as Palestinian consensus seems to suggest—Fatah conceded key political principles and reached rock bottom by the end of the 1970s, Hasan's polemic implies that secularist nationalist movements consistently served the Palestinian cause more effectively than Hamas and other Islamist movements.

From the standpoint of many Palestinians, Hasan's focus on ideological diversity within the anti-colonial movement carries little significance. The relationship between colonizer and colonized, occupier and occupied, and perpetrator and victim represents the most immediate and pressing antagonism to most Palestinians resisting Zionist occupation. This is in large part because the Israeli killing machine is rarely attentive to the internal specificities of the colonized—though this is certainly not the case in its appeals to the 'international community,' which consistently feature the anti-Islamist discourse of counter-terrorism.

Hasan ultimately legitimizes Zionist propaganda that depicts Hamas as a terrorist organization responsible for the murders of "innocent Israelis," instead of a genuine popular movement. His categorization of Hamas as an anti-Semitic (rather than anti-Zionist) movement most vividly displays his normative commitments. While Hasan's video may

represent an honest attempt to exonerate Palestinians from charges of senseless violence, it does so by propagating a dangerous dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, and unfairly demonizing a popular Islamist organization.

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