



**Mouin Rabbani** @MouinRabbani

Dec 3, 2023 · 71 tweets · [MouinRabbani/status/1731235976280740142](https://twitter.com/MouinRabbani/status/1731235976280740142)

THREAD: Did Israel create Hamas, and did Netanyahu empower it to rule the Gaza Strip? Since the 7 October attacks in Israel, many critics of Israeli policy, and of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in particular,

have asserted that Israel is responsible for the creation of Hamas. They furthermore claim that Netanyahu bears personal responsibility for Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip,

and accuse him of a de facto partnership with the Palestinian movement that has included Israeli funding of its government.

There's a plethora of statements by penitent Israeli officials, dating to long before 7 October, amplifying these assertions, particularly concerning Israel's purported midwifery of Hamas's establishment.

As so often the relevant history is complicated, and much as Israel would like to believe it is the omnipotent and therefore only relevant actor, this history cannot be reduced to exclusive Israeli agency.

Hamas, which was established during the late 1980s, is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a regional Islamist movement established in Egypt in 1928.

Its organizational structure has similarities to that of the communist movement during the same era. The Egyptian branch – at least until largely obliterated by the Sisi regime in the past decade – additionally served a central leadership function,

akin to that of the Soviet communist party (CPSU). Elsewhere, national chapters were established in various states, and activists joined branches based on their place of residence rather than countries of origin.

After 1948, when the West Bank was annexed by Jordan and the Gaza Strip administered by Egypt, MB members in the West Bank operated as part of the Jordanian branch.

In the Gaza Strip a local branch, much more autonomous given the separation of Gaza from the Egyptian mainland by the Sinai Peninsula, effectively operated as a Palestinian branch. (This may have also formally been the case given that,

in contrast to Jordan's annexation of the West Bank, Egypt administered the Gaza Strip as Palestinian rather than Egyptian territory, but I'm not certain on this point).

The Jordanian branch of the MB, conservative and pro-royalist in an age dominated by republican pan-Arabism and leftist challenges to the established order, prioritized the Islamization of society over confrontation.

In Gaza, now overwhelmingly populated by 1948 refugees, the MB took up arms. Yassir Arafat, Abu Jihad, Abu Iyad and other future Fatah leaders in fact joined the activities of the

Gaza MB, though the evidence suggests they did so more for access to its military capabilities than out of ideological conviction. In any event the Gaza MB, like others in the territory, was largely disarmed and demobilized by Egyptian intelligence - already at war with the MB - in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis.

The latter included a seven-month Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and concluded with the deployment of a UN force to the territory.

After the Israeli occupation commenced in 1967, the West Bank MB remained part of the Jordanian branch, and the Gaza branch continued to operate separately. With the ascendancy of the PLO, the MB in Palestine became a marginal organization.

It neither joined the PLO nor engaged in armed resistance activities independently of it. Very much focused on its Islamization project and a socio-cultural agenda, it was viewed as benign by the Israeli occupation authorities.

Under the Israeli occupation, which in the West Bank and Gaza Strip functioned as a military dictatorship administering a quasi-totalitarian regime, any activity of significance required a permit issued by the military governor.

Such permits were with rare exceptions never granted to civic organizations affiliated with any of the PLO's constituent factions, nor to the communist movement (which joined the PLO only in 1987). The MB however, given its political quiescence, had an easier time.

It was enabled/encouraged/facilitated (choose your term) by the Israeli authorities, and the permits it received for the establishment of various charities and institutions, primarily in the Gaza Strip, indisputably helped it grow.

It is entirely plausible that some funding was made available to these institutions as well. Throughout the world, most governments provide such funding.

What is pernicious here is not the permits and funding Israel's military government provided to MB institutions, but rather the permits and funding (sourced from Palestinian taxes) it systematically denied to others.

Israel hoped the MB would divert Palestinians from confrontation with Israel, that its growth would weaken the PLO, and failing that, would at least engage in escalating rivalry with it. It's called divide-and-rule.

And during the 1980s there were in fact a series of clashes between MB activists and those of rival organizations, particularly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) but also others, primarily in the Gaza Strip.

The 1981 firebombing of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) headquarters in Gaza City after the election of Haidar Abdel-Shafi, who had communist leanings, to its leadership was for many years widely blamed upon the MB.

But in this particular case it later emerged, including to the satisfaction of Abdel-Shafi, that the attack was in fact the work of Fatah activists.

While Israel indisputably assisted the growth of the MB, to suggest that Israel "created" a movement older than Israel itself, is more than exaggeration.

It reflects the extraordinary self-regard for which Israeli officials, who like to pretend that nothing happens unless they make it happen, are legendary.

It also reflects the extent to which impressionable Western observers and analysts eagerly lap up any nonsense fed to them by Israeli sources.

The first significant challenge to the Palestinian MB came in 1981, when a number of members, primarily from the Gaza Strip, and influenced by Islamic revolutionary movements in Egypt and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, left the MB to form Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

as an avowedly militant movement. PIJ's daring attacks on occupation forces in the Gaza Strip in 1986-1987, including a spectacular jailbreak, played a role in catalyzing the second and much more serious challenge to the MB,

namely the Palestinian popular uprising that erupted throughout the OPT in December 1987. By that time the West Bank and Gaza Strip branches of the MB had already formed a unified Palestinian MB national branch, and the MB in the Gaza Strip was itself becoming more militant.

The uprising posed a challenge to the MB because as an organization it was not involved in either the uprising or the uprising's leadership, the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) formed by the PLO factions together with PIJ.

Given the intensity of the uprising and of popular participation in it, the MB faced a real risk of its membership deserting en masse to other factions if it remained on the sidelines.

It is within this context that Hamas was established as the militant arm of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Palestine. Formally the Palestinian MB still exists, and it remains possible to be an MB but not Hamas member.

But such individuals are few and far between, and tend to be older West Bankers who were previously in the Jordanian MB and continue to prioritize the Islamization project.

Hamas likes to claim it was established on 9 December 1987, the same day the intifada erupted, and that it helped lead it from the outset. A number of independent scholars accept this foundation date.

I tend to find February 1988, when it issued its first communiques, more accurate. I also find it telling that Hamas was established as a separate organ:

if the initiative succeeded the MB would take credit and responsibility for it, and if it failed it could be disavowed as the work of unauthorized elements.

In the event Hamas proved a successful venture, for several reasons. One was the growing allure of religious movements in the Middle East,

which cannot be separated from the successful campaign to defeat or co-opt pan-Arabist and leftist movements by the US and its client regimes, including Israel, in the context of the Cold War.

A second is that Israel and its Western sponsors had for decades wasted no effort to weaken and make ineffective the PLO, and ensure it failed to achieve the strategic objective of

Palestinian self-determination.

A third is that Israel encouraged rivalry between Hamas, which never participated in UNLU, and the latter. Its army would for example enforce compliance with general strikes called by Hamas,

particularly in towns with large Christian populations like Bethlehem or others known to be strongholds of rival factions. By contrast it went to extremes in its attempts to break the strikes called by UNLU.

So although Israel's policies, initiatives, and actions helped strengthen Hamas in various deliberate and indirect ways, to suggest the movement would have been stillborn if not for Israel sounds requires an exceptionally selective reading of history.

By the early 1990s Hamas had become a significant and increasingly effective force. Its growth, and a shared interest between Yitzhak Rabin and Yassir Arafat in curtailing it, helped lay the groundwork for the Oslo Accords.

Rabin in 1992 publicly expressed the hope that the Gaza Strip would be swallowed by the sea. For his part Arafat compared Hamas to the collaborationist Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa, yet Oslo transformed the PLO into a Palestinian Vichy regime.

Hamas, which was very significantly weakened by the combined efforts of Israel and particularly the Palestinian Authority (PA) during the 1990s, did not initially participate in the Second Intifada.

It feared the uprising was being tactically exploited by Arafat to improve his bargaining position with Israel and the US, and would be crushed by PA security forces once this was achieved.

When it became apparent Arafat could no longer control the uprising and was tacitly encouraging it, Hamas went all-in. With Ariel Sharon primarily focused on eviscerating the Palestinian Authority, Hamas was a clear beneficiary.

Sharon's liquidation of Arafat was a further boon to the movement; Arafat's dominance of the Palestinian national movement was beyond challenge, and he expertly manipulated the Palestinian political system to ensure Hamas never gained a meaningful foothold in its institutions.

Arafat's inept successor, Mahmoud Abbas, in 2006 called PA legislative elections. In addition to seeking to consolidate his own position and legitimacy, he hoped to weaken his own, unruly Fatah movement by incorporating Hamas into the political system as a minority faction.

This would simultaneously break Fatah's political monopoly and commit Hamas to the decisions of Palestinian institutions without having the power to veto Abbas's agenda. It was a brilliant strategy, except that Hamas won the elections with an absolute, veto-proof majority.

Israel, its Western sponsors, and the PA immediately set about to undermine the election result and ensure Hamas was prevented from governing.

Separately, Israel in 2005 “disengaged” from the Gaza Strip, removing its settlements and military bases from within the territory while continuing its occupation from beyond its borders.

Hamas’s regular military attacks on soldiers and settlers in Gaza, and the Israeli manpower needed to defend these, was an important motivation, as was the desire to achieve US approval for the permanent retention of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Crucially, and in an effort to further weaken the PA, Israel with the acquiescence of its Western sponsors categorically refused to coordinate its disengagement with the PA or conduct an orderly handover of authority to it.

Numerous statements by Israeli leaders and analysts from that period predicted that these policy choices laid the groundwork for a Palestinian schism in which sooner or later the Gaza Strip would become “Hamastan” and the West Bank “Fatahstan”.

Netanyahu, who opposed the disengagement devised by Sharon because he advocated permanent Israeli retention of the Gaza Strip, had nothing to do with the formulation of these policies.

In 2007, anticipating an imminent coup attempt by the PA, planned in full coordination with the US (and Elliott Abrams in particular), Hamas pre-emptively seized power in the Gaza Strip.

It has ruled the territory ever since. Throughout this period, Israel has viewed Hamas as an enemy rather than ally.

During the first half decade at the very least, Israel could easily have deposed Hamas and installed the PA – the preferred policy of Israel’s Western sponsors – but deliberately chose not to do so.

Israel’s distaste for Hamas was trumped by its strategic objective of Palestinian fragmentation and division. In other words, it preferred to have rival Palestinian authorities ruling the West Bank and Gaza Strip to having them unified under a single, more compliant authority.

Hamas rule in Gaza also made it easier for Israel to maintain the blockade of this territory, keep it weak and on the brink of starvation, and periodically launch intensive assaults against the Gaza Strip.

In the words of Sharon confidante Dov Weisglass, speaking in 2006: “The idea is to put [Gaza] Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger”.

In 2008 Israeli specialists calculated that Gaza’s Palestinians required 2,279 calories per day to survive, and limited the foodstuffs permitted into the Gaza Strip accordingly.

The policy of fragmentation, blockade, and assault has been implemented by every Israeli government since 2005. It is not a policy innovation introduced or substantially revised by Netanyahu. Nor did Netanyahu “fund” the Hamas government.

Rather, in 2014 his far-right Foreign Minister, Avigdor Liebermann, several months after demanding the expulsion of United Nations envoy Robert Serry on fraudulent claims that

Serry planned to smuggle USD 20 million in Qatari funds to Hamas, begged Serry to personally transport suitcases of Qatari funds to Gaza in a UN vehicle convoy, in order to prevent a total breakdown in the territory after Israel's recently concluded Operation Protective Edge.

It is an arrangement that continued since 2014, supported by a consensus of Israeli political and military leaders, in order to relieve international pressure on it to relieve the blockade.

It was terminated in October of this year, when Israel belatedly discovered it could not only impose a full medieval siege of the Gaza Strip, but kill thousands of Palestinians at a record pace with the enthusiastic support, encouragement, and complicity of the West. END

• • •