



BETWEEN HAMAS AND THE PA: AN INTERVIEW WITH ISLAMIC JIHAD'S KHALID AL-BATSH

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Khalid al-Batsh, a senior official of Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Gaza chair of the “Freedom Committee,” established under the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement of May 2011, was interviewed in Cairo by Mouin Rabbani on 11 July 2012. The interview from which the following excerpts were taken covered a range of issues, including the impact of the “Arab Spring” on the Palestinians, the situations in Egypt and Syria, Islamic Jihad’s relations with Fatah and Hamas, and prospects for reform of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The excerpts below directly concern Islamic Jihad and Palestine. The complete interview in Arabic was published by JPS’s sister journal, Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, no. 93 (Winter 2013), pp. 122–37.

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The Authority in Ramallah has adopted a strategy of negotiation in a situation where there is no horizon for negotiating a political solution. Meanwhile, the Authority in Gaza has adopted a strategy of resistance without any program for resistance. I imagine that many, if not most, Palestinians see stagnation in both courses. What is the assessment of Islamic Jihad?

Equating the two paths is a great injustice. . . . It’s the difference between a project that leads to the loss of Palestinian rights and a project that strives to recover Palestinian rights, between one that engages with the enemy in negotiations and one that engages in permanent confrontation with the enemy. . . .

Concerning the first project, all observers of the negotiations with Israel—even Abu Mazin [Mahmud Abbas] himself—agree that the experiment has failed, with zero accomplishments, and that Israel dominates everything. [Israel] does not seek peace, but rather uses negotiations as a cover for building settlements, Judaizing Jerusalem, and expelling people from their homes.

On the other hand, what led Israel to exit Gaza? . . . They left in October 2005 against their will. The resistance achieved something. . . . The

resistance was contained and weakened by political divisions and fighting between Fatah and Hamas, but even so, with its simple and primitive means, this resistance was able to evict the Israelis from the Gaza Strip in less than five years, since the start of the [second] intifada . . .

The enemy knows before the friend that the capabilities of the resistance in the Gaza Strip have changed. The enemy no longer has a free hand in Gaza, and knows it. . . . In the past, our people's homes were hit by Israeli planes and artillery while the settlers remained secure in their settlements. Today, Israel doesn't dare return to the previous practice because they know that any air raid on Gaza will be met with a rocket attack on their settlements. . . . The days when Gaza could serve as a training ground for air strikes and tank and naval attacks are over, because they are met with locally-made rockets. This has created a situation of restraint among the Israelis.

Along the southern Lebanon pattern, with Hizballab?

Yes. This formula now exists in the Gaza Strip. This situation was not reached through negotiations, which brought us nothing. . . . In the West Bank, perhaps the resistance has receded a little, allowing Israel to think that any protests and denunciations will be verbal only. This has helped Israel become more radical.

How do you see the coming period in terms of Israel's action and strategy? Might there be a partial withdrawal from the West Bank? A new invasion of the Gaza Strip?

I believe the current regional changes might lead the Americans to advise Israel to give something to the Palestinians so as to frustrate the Arab revolution . . . , to give peace a chance once again. It wants to see Gaza in ruins, the resistance to surrender, and the option of resistance and jihad eliminated. The recent Israeli threat of a big strike against Gaza is something that we take seriously. . . .

The strategies of the Ramallah Authority and of Hamas are well known to everyone. Can you give us an idea of Islamic Jihad's strategy?

We believe that we're in the stage of Palestinian national liberation, and this stage cannot tolerate the existence of one authority here and another there. We also believe that compromising [with Israel] and declaring an "Authority" were regrettable, premature steps by the Palestinian leadership.

I assume you are referring to the Oslo accords?

Exactly. It was premature. The fruit was unripe, green, and bitter; the Oslo accords were bitter and we were made to swallow the bitterness. The result of this premature step was the Palestinian Authority.

So what is our strategy today? We consider ourselves on a path to national liberation and therefore proclaim ourselves a movement of national and Islamic liberation from Israeli occupation. This requires us to adhere to the motto of resistance and continue with that option to reclaim the land. The present reality in Palestine is that there is an authority for Hamas and an authority for the brothers in Fatah. This impedes and negatively affects the resistance project, but regardless it is essential at this stage to continue. We must rid ourselves of Oslo and its political ramifications. If we can terminate Oslo, that will be for the good. At all events, it must be made clear that this land is occupied and that resistance, jihad, and liberation are the only paths to restore our rights, while rejecting all compromise with Israel.

Does Islamic Jihad demand the Authority's dissolution both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or do you consider it a reality difficult to dislodge?

This requires a Palestinian national dialogue. The Authority has made many Palestinians dependent on it through work, official employment, and providing services, and therefore it is preferable that there be an Authority. . . . The Authority spares Israel the burden of occupation, but at the same time it plays a role in serving the Palestinian people.

Therefore, to be reasonable, we call for discussion on this point. For example, is it in our interest that the Authority remain on its current path, or that it should remain but with a different mandate? Should we go back to rebuilding the PLO as an authority for the Palestinian people? Whatever the case, the issue of dissolving the Authority requires national dialogue. Basically, I am in favor of turning our attention to building the PLO, because ultimately that is the body that should manage Palestinian affairs, internally and externally.

It is clear that restructuring the PLO faces two obstacles: the division between Fatah and Hamas, and the current PLO leadership's unwillingness to admit Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Vested interests within the organization do not wish to admit strong partners like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but I say that it is in the interests of *all* parties that Hamas be in the PLO, so that the organization becomes representative of all the Palestinian people. When the PLO represents all forces, it will represent something important for the Palestinian people. So we call for restructuring. The national resolution to restructure the PLO was adopted in Cairo on 4 May 2011.¹ True, there are now some complications

1. For the text of the Fatah-Hamas unity agreement, see *JPS* 40, no. 4 (Summer 2011), Doc. B4, pp. 212–14. See also International Crisis Group, "Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change . . .," *Middle East Report*, no. 110 (Ramallah/Gaza/Jerusalem/Washington/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 20 July 2011).

and hindrances, but ultimately the resolution was taken and must be implemented. The Transitional Leadership Committee of the PLO that was established in Cairo² needs to convene to restructure the organization, draw up a unified national strategy for managing the conflict with Israel, and arrange the internal Palestinian situation so as to end the division and continue the legitimate resistance of our people, in compliance with previous national agreements.

Concerning reconciliation, what is your understanding of the reasons for the Fatah-Hamas division, and what do you believe would be required to end it?

We believe that the internal Palestinian division resulted from . . . the fact that there are two programs, one related to diplomatic action and a political solution that has imposed itself on Palestinian life, and the other the program of the resistance, which grew during the intifada due to the great sacrifices of the Palestinian people. One of the parties of the resistance [Hamas] decided to be a partner in political life and participated in the 2006 elections. The election results were in its favor, but the other party [Fatah] did not accept the results. Even the international community and those who had welcomed Hamas's entry into political life were taken by surprise. . . . [Clearly] they hadn't wanted Hamas to win but just to be within the opposition where they could do nothing. The results tipped the scales and the problems began. We in Islamic Jihad had not wanted Hamas to seek authority, and this is what we had advised them at the time. . . .

Why?

Because we believed that this would mean retreating from resistance, that [Hamas] would be distracted from its resistance. We realized beforehand that seeking authority and entering elections would be followed by a bloodbath. We foresaw that ultimately authority would not be handed over to Hamas as the results dictated, and that by the same token Hamas would not accept having won without being allowed to govern. The outcome was as we expected. . . . The siege of Gaza began with the rejection of the electoral results. Hamas was asked to recognize the [Oslo] agreements and recognize Israel—all these files were brought up anew to win international legitimacy and the Quartet's approval. We had already finished that whole discussion, and it should not have been presented to Hamas. And events exploded in the Gaza Strip.

2. The committee, comprising, inter alia, the secretaries-general of all Palestinian political formations, among others, was created primarily for the purpose of giving Hamas and Islamic Jihad a role in formal Palestinian national decision-making and policy formulation pending completion of PLO restructuring. It is thus a temporary body, and has met either only once or not yet.

As for the reconciliation efforts, I believe that after six years of division the two parties realized that neither could exclude the other. Hamas and Fatah realized beyond any doubt that continuing exclusion was impossible as was hegemony in political life. So Fatah is suffering in the West Bank even though billions are paid to the Authority's treasury, to Prime Minister Fayyad and President Abbas.

But Abu Mazin can't rule and be sovereign without partnership and without feeling that he represents all the Palestinian people, in Gaza, the West Bank, and in the rest of the Palestinian homeland. For its part, Hamas, though it rules Gaza, does not feel settled because there is something missing, and it too feels that it does not represent the whole Palestinian people. . . .

Ultimately, this is what led to the reconciliation effort, and on 4 May 2011 we signed the agreement in Cairo under the kind auspices of Egypt. But the reconciliation agreement has not yet been implemented. . . . If we want to reach our goals quickly, there must be commitment to the Cairo (reconciliation) agreement and it must be implemented.

What are the main obstacles to reconciliation? One has the impression that we're headed not towards reconciliation but towards a "federation" that reflects Fatah's ongoing control in the West Bank and Hamas's in Gaza. In other words, an implicit agreement to co-exist rather than to reconcile. . . .

The current situation is management of the division and co-existence with the division. What is needed to implement the Cairo agreement is to move from the agreement to partnership: *political* partnership in managing the Authority and its institutions, and *national* partnership in restructuring the PLO—we have to differentiate between the two. Islamic Jihad will be part of the national partnership but will not be part of the political partnership within the Authority. . . .

As for the obstacles, the most important are the issues that we in the Freedom Committees³ have agreed to resolve. Of these, the most important is political prisoners in Gaza and the West Bank—I'm not talking here of ordinary criminals, but *political* prisoners. In both territories, whoever is proven to have been detained for political reasons must be released. . . .

Among the other issues that remain unresolved both in the West Bank and Gaza are public freedoms. Fatah does not operate in Gaza, and neither Hamas nor Islamic Jihad operates in the West Bank, so "public freedoms" means opening up institutions and union and political activities in both areas to everyone. Neither has the issue of free journalistic work—freedom of the press. Detentions and arrests for political reasons continue, and the

3. Two "Freedom Committees," one in the Gaza Strip (which Batsh chairs) and other in the West Bank, were set up to monitor the implementation of the Cairo agreement's stipulations on rights and freedoms.

issue of those whose employment was terminated—1,240 civil servants dismissed because of their political background—also has not been resolved.

Do you mean in the Gaza Strip?

No, in the West Bank. In Gaza, the situation is different. All these are hindrances, but more important is the fact that we have not started to form a government, despite the agreement of 20 June 2012⁴ between President Abu Mazin and Hamas political bureau chief Khalid Mishal to begin consultations. . . . Also, the work of the Elections Committee in the Gaza Strip has been suspended, and . . . we have not started dealing with the questions of the victims of internal fighting and social reconciliation.

But at least [we should] begin forming a government that would commit to such matters as unifying the security institutions, preparing for legislative, presidential, and Palestine National Council elections and so on. . . . There has been no progress on any of these issues—they seem to be paralyzed.

Some believe that both parties are comfortable with the present situation.

There is no doubt that the two parties are managing the division and that each is comfortable with what it has. Each is sitting over an area, charging taxes, and living its life. But this is a situation that no Palestinian accepts.

No one accepts it, yet there isn't enough pressure to change it. . . .

Had there been no agreement, there would have been pressure. But there is an agreement but no implementation. Egypt is its sponsor and guarantor; Egypt should exert pressure now to force the two parties to implement it. . . .

You expect Egyptian pressures now?

. . . President [Mohamed] Morsi is in a position to influence both Hamas and Fatah, whereas in the past Mubarak was exerting pressure on one side only. . . . In any case, fundamentally this is the responsibility of the *Mukhabarat* [General Intelligence Directorate]; the good brothers in Egyptian intelligence are the ones responsible for this issue. What is required now is to pressure both parties to resume implementing the agreement. . . . We need to begin consultations for the formation of a unity government so we can complete the steps of the reconciliation and move on to the program of the PLO.

4. For the June 2012 reconciliation meeting, see Michele K. Esposito, comp., "Quarterly Update on Conflict and Diplomacy," *JPS* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2012), p. 133.

There are some who say that the political division between Fatah and Hamas is one of form, but that the division is deeper than that—the outcome of a long Israeli policy, begun even before Oslo, to divide the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. There are those who say that the division had succeeded to the point where even if Hamas had not won the 2006 elections, a division between the Gaza Fatah and the West Bank Fatah would have taken place. Do you agree that the roots of the division are much deeper than a political division between two organizations?

No, I do not agree. . . . The Palestinian people are geographically divided, but it is the occupation that imposed the political division. [Then Israeli prime minister Ariel] Sharon declared before the withdrawal from Gaza that the Palestinian people must be given something to differ over. He said that one month before the withdrawal. . . . And that is what happened. In other words, Fatah and Hamas fell into the trap that Sharon and his group had set.

But is it possible to frustrate the project? You say that the division is based on political differences. But some say that the political differences are beside the point, and that the real issue is a conflict of interests. . . .

The basis is a political division. But as it has continued, interests have developed. There are people with interests, and large groups in the West Bank and in Gaza are feeding off the division and do not allow it to end. Perhaps their interests would be harmed by its termination. . . . The division has become what sustains these people, including senior officials and ministers of both parties. . . . So yes, interests have sprouted up in the wake of the division, and this hinders reconciliation. There are interests that do not want to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. . . .

Islamic Jihad has a presence both in the West Bank under Fatah and in the Gaza Strip under Hamas. In both areas, it refuses to join the Authority—whether through the government or the Legislative Council. What is your assessment of the two situations? What are the differences between the two systems, and how do you relate to them?

. . . In Gaza, Islamic Jihad has a strong presence and would have capabilities regardless of the government in power. Even so, a government such as that of Hamas is much better. At least the government in Gaza does not hinder the work of the resistance. Otherwise, how could Islamic Jihad have engaged in battle last March, [firing] rockets for four days,⁵ as was witnessed by all? This option is not available in the West Bank, for many reasons.

5. Concerning the March 2012 fighting in Gaza, see Michele K. Esposito, "Quarterly Update on Conflict and Diplomacy," *JPS* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2012), p. 121.

But we do not have animosity towards either government, either in Gaza or in Ramallah. As far as we are concerned, both governments are our brethren. If we differ with them politically or as to performance, these differences do not reach the point of quarrels or fighting, and we manage our relations through dialogue and understanding. We want good relations with both parties—the one that supports the resistance, and the one that hinders it.

I want to go back to the fighting in March. It seems that, for the first time, Islamic Jihad not only initiated the conflict with Israel while Hamas stayed in the background, but that it also, for the first time, was the main Palestinian negotiating partner with the Egyptians in the cease fire talks that followed. Has this affected your relations with Hamas, and has Hamas lost its prestige as the sole reference for any mediation—whether with Israel or Egypt—concerning Gaza?

... In general, when there is tension involving an Israeli aggression in Gaza, it is the Egyptians, and no other party, that contacts us. If there is escalation or war, we retaliate as resistance against the aggression. When the parties begin to think of stopping the aggression or cooling the tension, contacts take place with the Egyptians, who talk to the brothers in the government in Gaza and to the brothers in the Authority in Ramallah. So this is the triangle of our relations in terms of contacts, and there is no other party outside the parameters of this triangle.

During the March battle, the Israelis, as usual, began with bombardment, strikes, and assassination. They expected people to remain silent. We took a decision not to remain silent and to confront the occupier. And, by God's grace, the battle was launched, and our firing capacity and skill, our persistence, the volume of fire, even our endurance in holding our positions, were all contrary to Israeli expectations. And for the first time, we forced the Israelis to agree, through an undertaking to the Egyptians, to stop the assassinations.⁶ In the end, the Israelis had to respond, via Egypt, to the Palestinian people's conditions. This was a great victory for Islamic Jihad and for the resistance in the Gaza Strip in general.

How do you interpret Israel's action?

They knew they were fighting Islamic Jihad, and that Islamic Jihad has nothing to lose, controls its own decisions, and does not count its casualties.... [So] trying to match Islamic Jihad in battle would entail great losses, particularly if Jihad extended the range of its missiles....

6. Israel did not publicly announce a suspension of assassinations at the end of the March 2012 hostilities. However, according to informed sources interviewed in Cairo on behalf of JPS, Israel authorized the Egyptians to inform the Palestinians that it would do so.

There are some who say that the threat was directed not only at Israel but, indirectly, at the Hamas government in Gaza as well.

We do not act in such manner with the government in Gaza. Ultimately, the Hamas government gave support.

I am not saying that you threatened Hamas, but that Hamas or the Gaza Authority might have been threatened if the conflict had escalated and led to a wider Israeli invasion.

Perhaps this might have been the feeling of some, but the government declared that it supports the resistance and that it has responsibility for protecting the people. Whoever declares the motto of resistance bears the consequences.

Islamic Jihad is considered to have been the spark of the first intifada through its operations in the mid-1980s. When Jihad was established, the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza was giving priority to religious and cultural work and avoided conflict with Israel. Later, the situation was totally different when the Brotherhood established Hamas. My question is: were many of the founding members of Islamic Jihad previously members of the Brotherhood?

Some of them, but not all.

Given that you and Hamas are both Islamic organizations, have you in Islamic Jihad thought of merging with them? What is the difference between Islamic Jihad and Hamas?

... As you said, Islamic Jihad started the intifada and triggered major operations against the occupiers. Perhaps this matter did prompt the Muslim Brothers to establish Hamas in the first or second month of the intifada.⁷ In any event, we always welcome the entry of all forces to the field of battle against the Israeli occupier. ...

What are the differences?

There are no fundamental differences, but political interpretations. Islamic Jihad was launched before Hamas. Also, our concern has always been not to contribute to internal strife, and we have not assumed any political authority. Our view is known, and we are a meeting ground for the nationalists and the Islamists over the land of Palestine, and have not declared an antagonistic position towards anyone, either towards Hamas or the nationalists. We do not differ with Hamas as to our project, since Hamas is

7. Hamas was formally established in January 1988, when it began issuing leaflets under that name. Ziad Abu-Amr, "Hamas: A Historical and Political Background," *JPS* 22, no. 4 (Summer 1993), p. 10. See also pp. 6–10 for the development of the Gaza Muslim Brotherhood and the foundation of Islamic Jihad.

Islamic like us, and we do not differ over religious matters like monotheism, the Sunna [teachings and practices of the Prophet] and so on. . . .

Let me interrupt here. Fatbi Shiqqaqi, the assassinated founder of Islamic Jihad, was known for trying to forge common ground between nationalist and Islamist, Sunni and Shi'ite currents. Insofar as the Muslim Brotherhood is a Sunni movement, is this a factor of difference between the two movements? Could the Brotherhood have seen Islamic Jihad as too close to Shi'ism?

Let me deal first with the issue of the nationalist and Islamic currents. Islamic Jihad has emphasized their common ground. . . . We organized a conference in Beirut, the National Islamic Conference, to make clear that the two currents are not at odds with each other. In the face of the U.S., Israeli, and international imperialist plot, we wanted to show that they complement one another, that they are integral to each other. . . .

As for the Shi'ites and Sunnis, we, as Muslims, do not see that there is a difference between them: they are Muslims like us. They have the same rights and the same duties as we do. There have been fatwas from high Sunni authorities—including Al-Azhar itself—that Shi'ites—especially the Twelvers—are sects that we can worship alongside of. But we do not proselytize for them, we do not call for people to take up Shi'ism, and we consider that Sunni doctrine is more complete than Shi'ite doctrine. . . . Dismemberment and sectarianism were among the most important tools used by U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice in 2006 when promoting the “New Middle East” based on religious fanaticism, sectarianism, and the dismemberment of the region through stirring up and maintaining continuous strife between Shi'ites and Sunnis and others. This way Israel can continue secure and undisturbed to pursue its goals in Palestine. Anyone who tries to stir up religious or sectarian war is serving Israel.

Let us come back to the differences between you and the Brotherhood. Are there others besides those you mentioned?

Perhaps we differ with respect to resistance tactics, and there may be normal competition over operations and fighters. But ultimately, there are differences but not disputes. The main difference is that Hamas has opted to be a major partner in the Authority, whereas Islamic Jihad still considers itself a movement of national liberation whose priority is resistance, not partnership with the Authority.