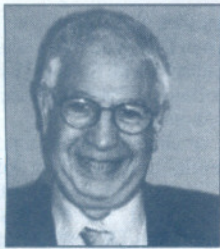


Palestine

# The real cause



By Amir Taheri

*'Many Hamas leaders knew that by seizing Gaza and expelling Fatah they would be burning all bridges'*

**W**HO sets Hamas strategy? As the radical Palestinian movement braces itself for what could be a long struggle against its rival Fatah, if not a full-blown Palestinian civil war, the question merits more than mere academic interest.

Just days after Hamas staged its coup to achieve exclusive control of Gaza, it is now clear that the military operation launched against the positions of the Palestinian security forces in the strip, was never discussed in the Islamist organisation's Consultative Assembly (shura).

Well-placed sources close to Hamas tell me that had the issue been brought up, it is possible that a majority of the shura members would have opposed the coup de force which has divided the Palestinians as never before. Even Esmail Haniya, the man who headed the first Hamas Cabinet, is believed to have been "less than enthusiastic" about the operation.

"Only a few people knew about the scheme," says a member of the Palestinian National Assembly who, though close to Hamas, is an independent. "Many Hamas leaders knew that by seizing Gaza and burning all bridges."

Haniya appears to have placed by Saudi Arabia to persuade Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), Fatah's leader, to put all security

forces under a neutral command.

The issue of Fatah's armed groups in Gaza had not come up in the secret talks that led to the Makkah accord a few weeks ago. Nevertheless, there was an implicit understanding that Fatah would transfer control of the bulk of its armed groups in Gaza to the so-called national unity government formed under Saudi patronage.

Tehran was also concerned that a Hamas-Fatah deal would strengthen those within the Syrian leadership who dislike what they see as their increasing vassalisation to Tehran. The same elements within the Syrian leadership had opened an indirect dialogue with Israel and received some encouraging hints from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Syrian critics of the alliance with

hit a bump on the road.

What looked like a Hamas sell-out to the moderate Arab powers came as major disappointment to the Islamic republic in Iran and its Syrian allies and Lebanese Hezbollah clients.

**Vetoed:** Palestinian sources concur that the man who effectively vetoed the Makkah deals is Khaleed Misha'al, Hamas's "Supreme Leader" who lives in exile in Damascus. Misha'al initially endorsed the Makkah deals but was persuaded to change his position under Iranian and Syrian pressure.

In a visit to Tehran, where he was supposed to brief Hamas' Iranian allies on the Makkah deals, Misha'al was told point blank that Iran favoured "an intensification of the struggle against the Zionist enemy"

The battle in Gaza was something more than a local struggle for power between rival Palestinian factions.

It was dictated by strategic imperative that could affect the broader region as Iran and the US intensify their rivalry over who sets the agenda for the future of the Middle East

Tehran pointed to the Makkah deals as a model that might help repair ties with moderate Arab states, placate the US and, eventually, even persuade Israel to give up the Golan Heights which it won in the 1967 war. A Hamas defection followed by a Syrian change of policy would have left the Islamic Republic isolated and exposed.

Had the deals made in Makkah worked, Hamas would have geared its strategy to moderate Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan and, indirectly through them, to the overall Middle East policies of the western powers led by the United States. Until earlier this month, when the first Hamas guns were fired in Gaza, it seemed that hopes of Tehran and Damascus to organise a new "Rejection Front" to oppose Israel and, beyond it the United States, had

rather than an easing of tension that a coalition with Abu Mazen implied.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has structured his foreign policy on the assumption that a military showdown against the US and Israel is inevitable and that, when it comes, the radical forces led by Tehran would be able to resist long enough and to raise the cost of the conflict in human terms to break the adversaries' will to fight.

For Ahmadinejad's policy to succeed, it is imperative that Lebanon and the Palestinian territories become advanced posts for Iran.

Despite occasional threats to unleash a hailstorm of missiles against Iran's Arab neighbours in the Gulf, it is unlikely that the Tehran leadership would take the risk of killing large numbers of the very

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# Use of the

people it hopes to win over to its cause. The only US regional ally that the Islamic Republic might attack without concern for who gets killed there is Israel.

Tehran and Damascus believe that they can win the current tug of war against Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his governing coalition in Lebanon.

In November the Lebanese parliament, in which Siniora has a majority of five seats, is scheduled to meet to elect a new president of the republic to succeed the pro-Syrian incumbent Emile Lahoud. It is enough to murder four more anti-Syrian parliamentarians for Siniora to lose his majority.

In the meantime the series of assassinations may well frighten some members of Siniora's coalition to switch sides and support ex-General Michel Aoun, a Maronite Christian ally of Hezbollah and Syria's candidate for the presidency of Lebanon.

It is in anticipation of winning control of Lebanon that Iran has increased its shipments of money and arms to Hezbollah and its allies. Most analysts agree that the Lebanese branch of Hezbollah had replaced virtually the whole of its losses in last July's war against Israel.

A Lebanese army bogged down in battles against Sunni radical groups, controlled by Syria, would not have the means needed to also take on Hezbollah is the Shiite party decided to stage a coup in Beirut.

With Lebanon in turmoil to its north, the last thing that Israel would want is to be forced to intervene militarily to its south in Gaza.

The battle in Gaza was something more than a local struggle for power between rival Palestinian factions. It was dictated by strategic imperative that could affect the broader region as Iran and the US intensify their rivalry over who sets the agenda for the future of the Middle East. COURTESY GULF NEWS

*The writer, an Iranian author, is based in Europe*