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## THE PALESTINE ISLAMIC JIHAD: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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The Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is the most radical terrorist organization operating in the Palestinian arena. It was established in 1981 by two Islamist activists in the Gaza Strip, Dr. Fathi 'Abd al-'Aziz Shiqaqi, a physician from Rafah, and Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz 'Awda, a preacher from the Jabaliyya refugee camp. The two men, who had studied in Zaqaziq University, a center of Islamic radicalism in Egypt, rejected the approach of the mainstream Islamic movement, the Muslim Brethren, to the Palestine question. The Brethren maintained that the Muslim world should deal with Israel only after curing its own spiritual and religious ills by returning the masses to Islam and revitalizing Islam. Once Muslim unity was achieved, the Muslim Brethren believed, Israel's destruction would be quickly achieved. By contrast, Shiqaqi argued that Israel, by its very existence, was a source of moral and spiritual corruption that prevented Muslims from remedying the malaise of their society.

The Islamic Jihad's ideology blended Palestinian nationalist ideas with themes drawn from three other sources: the ideology of the Muslim Brethren; patterns of activity of the militant Islamist groups in Egypt; and, uniquely among Sunni movements, the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shi'i leader of the Islamic revolution in Iran.

According to the Islamic Jihad, a proper reading of the Quran and an understanding of history would lead to the conclusion that Palestine is the focus of the religio-historical confrontation between the Muslims and their eternal enemies, the Jews. The Muslims represent the forces of truth (*haq*) while the Jews (and Christians) embody the forces of apostasy (*batil*). In the context of this confrontation, the Palestine problem is the core of a Western offensive that began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and reached its climax in 1918 with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, which had symbolized Islamic unity. According to this view, Palestine was always the focus of Western imperialist designs and was meant to serve as a launch pad to take over other Muslim territories. Inasmuch as the Jewish presence in Palestine symbolizes Muslim inferiority in the modern age, commitment to Palestine cannot be framed in the narrow confines of Palestinian nationalism. Instead, it is an essentially Islamic issue and is the key "to every serious strategy aimed at the liberation and unification of the Islamic nation." Herein lays the Islamic Jihad's ideological innovation. The jihad in Palestine entails a commitment to two inter-related goals: the liberation of Palestine and pan-Islamic revival. Jihad is the only way to liberate Palestine, since Muslim victory and the

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elimination of Israel are foreordained by God's words in the Quran.

Shiqaqi praised Ayatollah Khomeini for being the first Muslim leader to give Palestine its proper place in his Islamic ideology. In addition, the Islamic revolution in Iran was a major victory in the struggle against western attempts to exclude Islam from politics, and was uniquely successful in establishing a state founded on Islamic law. Therefore, the PIJ, alone among Sunni Islamist movements, saw Khomeini as the rightful leader of the entire Muslim world.

The PIJ began its armed operations in 1984. Shiqaqi was arrested in March 1986 and was deported to Lebanon, along with 'Awda, in April 1988. He continued to lead the movement from exile until his assassination by Israeli agents in Malta in October 1995. Dr. Ramadan 'Abdallah Shallah succeeded him and set up his headquarters in Damascus. Since Shiqaqi was a charismatic and excessively centralist leader, the movement needed some time before it could resume operations.

While Islamic Jihad preceded Hamas (established in 1988), it remained the smaller of the two movements. Hamas became a mass movement with a political branch grounded in a widespread network of religious and welfare institutions. By contrast, the Islamic Jihad remained a revolutionary vanguard of several hundred activists. During the 1987-1993 *intifada*, the PIJ sought cooperation or unity with Hamas, but the latter was reluctant to move in this direction.

Shiqaqi's move to Lebanon enhanced the movement's ties with Hizballah and Iran. Iran became the movement's major financial sponsor, and Hizballah provided it with training facilities and logistical aid. Thanks to Hizballah's support, the PIJ expanded its network in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Whereas Hamas was always an independent Palestinian movement, Islamic Jihad became an instrument of Iranian policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Both PIJ and Hamas rejected the 1993 Oslo Accords as a betrayal of Palestinian and Islamic rights, and they launched attacks against Israeli targets in a "race" (Shiqaqi's own word) to halt the peace process. By 2000, PIJ could take credit for killing several dozen Israelis, mostly civilians. While it refused to recognize the Palestinian Authority as a legitimate government and did not participate in the 1996 PA elections, Islamic Jihad did not challenge the PA politically in the same manner as did Hamas. However, it was easier for the PA to take strong measures against the Islamic Jihad, as the smaller organization, and it closed *al-Istiqlal*, the Jihad newspaper in Gaza, and arrested some low-level activists.

The outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation in September 2000 gave a boost to the Islamic Jihad. Along with Hamas, it claimed that jihad was the only way to drive Israel out of the West Bank and Gaza, as the first phase in the complete liberation of Palestine. It enjoyed full freedom of action and apparently some logistical support from PA officials, as well. On the operational level, Islamic Jihad activists joined hands with Hamas and Fatah activists in carrying out attacks against Israeli targets. Concurrently, the Islamic Jihad competed with the two other movements in carrying out more daring and devastating operations, as a way to enhance its prestige.

Despite its successes, PIJ remains a small movement. According to numerous opinion polls, it enjoys the support of only 4-5% of the Palestinian population, mainly because it lacks the institutional network built by Hamas. That fact, however, enables Islamic Jihad to focus on its ideological goals and disregard wider political considerations. Consequently, the Islamic Jihad did not participate in the Cairo talks held during mid-November between Fatah and Hamas to discuss a possible temporary suspension of suicide bombings inside Israel, and it persists in carrying out its devastating attacks.