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# Middle East Brief

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## Clans and Militias in Palestinian Politics

Prof. Dror Ze'evi

From March to July 2007, the British journalist Alan Johnston was held in the Gaza Strip by *Jaysh al-Islam* (the Army of Islam). It was later revealed that the epithet was an alias for a local group of families headed by the Dughmush clan, which is said to have been recruited by al-Qaeda. According to some sources, it took a combination of Hamas's military might and a hefty transfer of cash to convince the clan to give up its British hostage.<sup>1</sup> Then, in late October 2007, serious fighting broke out near the city of Gaza between Hamas and another clan, the Gaza-based Hillis family, said to be Fatah supporters, in which four people were killed and scores injured. An entire neighborhood was leveled in the fighting, which ended in a cease-fire agreement.<sup>2</sup> Intermittent fighting between Hamas and these clans continues to this day.

These incidents draw our attention to a seldom observed reality of Palestinian political life: Clans, which share many attributes with tribal structures but have developed along a different path, are a major factor in local politics and in many ways define the boundaries of what is politically possible.

In the Palestinian territories, clans (locally called *hamulas*, sing. pronounced *hamoola*) have become a focus of political activity and major hubs of local power. Since members of Hamas or Fatah invariably belong to their clans as well, when a member of one organization is killed by a member of another, and the killer's identity is known, it is no longer just an issue of organizational enmity. The perpetrator is likely to be sued by the victim's clan in accordance with

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local tribal law. Thus, Hamas in Gaza will take action in certain neighborhoods of Rafah or Khan Yunis only after informing the major local clans and asking their permission. In the West Bank, Abu Mazen's Palestinian Authority will seldom appoint a senior official not approved by the local clans. Any attempt by the government to disarm militias is automatically perceived as an attempt to chip away at the power of the clans and encounters serious opposition.

Yet, ultimately this quasi-tribal structure is detrimental to the emergence of a viable democratic culture, harnessing the power of the clans may prove critical at this stage for establishing authority in a fledgling Palestinian state—and understanding clans is thus a crucial part of the study of local Palestinian politics. A Palestinian state's capacity to actually govern and execute its commitments in the Israeli-Palestinian political process; its monopoly over the means of violence; the possibility of democratization; and the effects of outside intervention on Palestinian political culture—all are to some extent dependent on this all-too-often ignored phenomenon.

This Brief will discuss the social underpinnings of Palestinian clans, examine their history and modus operandi in the political arena, and consider their possible significance vis-à-vis future political scenarios.

## What Is a Clan?

Theoretically, a clan, like a tribe, is a group of people who claim common ancestry through their fathers' male line and thus share the same family name. In Palestinian rural society (and in large segments of Palestinian urban society), when a woman marries she formally joins her husband's family, knowing that her progeny will be counted among his kin and not hers. These children, along with their first and second cousins, will constitute the backbone of the father's clan. In cases of divorce the wife usually returns to her original clan, while the children remain with the husband's family.

As many anthropologists have shown, however, claims of common male ancestry are often a fictitious instrument intended to shore up political partnerships between unrelated groups of people. Smaller families, runaway groups, or fragments of defunct clans often join larger families. The process is usually made simpler by claims of descent from a vague overarching tribe that several *hamulas* belong to. This half-imagined meta-clan is an ideal instrument for integrating smaller families. The aspirant group first claims descent from the meta-clan and informally adopts its name; it then slowly inches its way to the fringes of the clan, eventually merging seamlessly with it.<sup>3</sup> This process is watched closely by other clans, who sometimes express disdain at the upstarts' nerve; but in due course the separate origins are forgotten and the two families are welded together.

Until the merger is complete, though, the original family makes up the inner circle while the newcomers are in a second, less protected, tier. There is also a third tier—members of other small families who pledge their loyalty to the big clan and accept client status in return for the protection and assistance provided by their powerful patrons. This third circle is more fickle and less committed than the inner ones, and is often not privy to decisions made and actions undertaken by the heads of the family.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the clan is never a one-man show, and it is seldom run by the “patriarch” or the oldest living male member. Although the elders are respected and listened to, it is often the more talented men of the second generation who run the show, and in many cases decisions are made jointly in the family’s routine gathering place in one of the bigger houses.<sup>4</sup>

Clans adapt to social and political realities. In West Bank towns, which are under less military and political pressure at the moment, heads of families meet informally to resolve by negotiation problems that crop up. In some West Bank villages and refugee camps—and in the Gaza Strip, where actual survival is often on the line—some of the clans have become paramilitary groups, patrolling their quarters and sometimes taking part in raids against their perceived enemies.

## Clans in Palestinian History

In pre-twentieth-century Palestine there were three main types of clan-like structures: the Bedouin tribe, the urban elite household, and the peasant *hamula*. Each of these types had a different political and economic setup. Bedouins depended on their tribes for the division of shepherding, husbandry labor, and military raids. Provincial elite households were part of the Ottoman economic and political networks and served as mediators between the imperial center and the local population. Peasant clans, like Bedouin ones, depended on sheer numbers of males for protection, but were also necessary for the functioning of a sharecropping arrangement common in Ottoman Palestine. In this arrangement, sometimes referred to as *musha’* or *masha’a* (common lands; shared or joint possessions), large parts of the village’s fields and pastures were divided into several plots of roughly the same yield, which passed in rotation between clans.<sup>5</sup> Until the late nineteenth century the Ottoman authorities treated heads of clans as semi-formal legal agents, accountable for taxation, for administering justice, and for keeping an eye on public order. Heads of urban clans often bought their way into government-based positions—as, for example, court officials and tax farmers. When, in the late Ottoman period, regional and municipal councils were established and the position of *mukhtar* (village headman) was created to represent village communities and urban neighborhoods in their dealings with the state, these functionaries were chosen, as a rule, from among the leaders of powerful clans.

During the British occupation of Palestine and the Mandate period, from 1917 to 1948, the High Commissioner’s government found it useful to promote the same familial structures. They backed up the urban elite families—

notably the famous Husseinis, Khalidis, and Nashashibis of Jerusalem, but also elite clans in other towns. They relied on Bedouin tribal sheikhs to keep their tribes under control and strengthened the clan base of villages by appointing *mukhtars* from among the village’s strongest clans. While ancient sharecropping systems declined in importance as privatization of land proceeded apace, the village clan system was upheld by the Mandate authorities as a means of controlling the population.

In 1948, Palestinian society was shattered by war and dispersion, but despite uprooting and relocation the same clan structure survived—under the Jordanians in the West Bank, under Egypt in the Gaza Strip, and, scathed but functioning, under Israeli rule as well. After the initial shock, those urban households that were not driven out and did not find refuge abroad reinstated themselves in their classic roles as mediators and local patrons.<sup>6</sup> Tribal sheikhs did the government’s bidding among their tribesmen and continued their long-time cooperation with intelligence services, recruiting agents to cross national borders; *mukhtars*, often chosen from those families who were deemed more loyal by the new governments, were again appointed to run villages. Palestinian society was in economic and political disarray, and once more the clan structure was best suited to provide assistance and welfare to the entire population.

For much of the subsequent half-century it seemed as though clans were slowly declining in power as a factor in Palestinian politics. This impression may have had to do with the impact of then ubiquitous modernization theories on perceptions of reality, but to a larger degree it resulted from the fact that Egypt, Israel, and Jordan all ruled their Palestinian populations with an iron fist. Under these circumstances, local clans found it increasingly difficult to operate.<sup>7</sup>

The Six Day War in 1967 brought with it a certain change in local politics. The great bulk of Palestinian society came under Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza, and in a sense reunited with their compatriots inside the former Israeli borders. Two circumstances now came to the fore. One of them was the relative freedom that Israeli Arabs began to enjoy at that point. After years of military rule, they were allowed a greater degree of freedom to move about. At the same time Israel decided not to annex the area it occupied – the West Bank and Gaza – and to entrust it to military control, pending a political resolution. At first these two developments seemed to further undermine clan control. Young Palestinians who found work (and often residence) in Israel enjoyed their freedom of movement and earned large sums of money. As a result they retrieved a measure of personal independence and sometimes became

richer than their clan elders. At the same time, a clueless, sometimes brash Israeli military rule was oblivious to the clans and ignored them, adding to their growing weakness.

Yet clan fortunes began to turn even under Israeli rule. Until the 1980s the occupation authorities continued to ignore the traditional clans and even tried to actively weaken them by raising marginal families to positions of power;<sup>8</sup> but later on, in an attempt to reduce army expenditures and make military rule more effective, they learned to rely on what they perceived to be the local leadership. There were other factors at play. For instance, according to Salim Tamari, in the absence of serious labor organizations the heads of clans were used to organize people for work in Israeli factories, thus giving them even more leverage to retain the clan system.<sup>9</sup> Another boost was given by Intelligence services (mainly Israeli, but also Jordanian and Egyptian), who sought out local leaders to help recruit agents from among clan members.

## The Reemergence of the Clan

In the years since the mid-1980s the clans have known many ups and downs. This was particularly apparent during the first Intifada, from 1987 to 1991, which targeted not only the Israeli occupation but also the old, established families, seen by some as corrupt and as subservient to Israel. The Oslo Accords and the return of Yasser Arafat to the Territories seemed to deal another blow to the clans. Most of the PLO leaders abroad did not belong to the leading families of Palestine; some of them hailed from powerless refugee families. But for a while the spirit was one of total immersion in the national project. The new elite may not have had the enthusiastic backing of the clans, but these were legendary leaders of the struggle, and they were home again. They were the future, and the clans faded into the background.

But then, as the possibilities of concord between Israel and the Palestinians faltered, Yasser Arafat came to the conclusion that there was nothing more to be gained from his deal with Yitzhak Rabin—and he decided to change tactics. His new policy was one that he had often used in the past in other parts of the Arab world: decentralization, along with a semblance of anarchy. This served his purpose well. Locally planned and executed attacks against Israelis increased rapidly and Arafat could claim he had lost control and was therefore not to blame. But in the long term, the price of this policy was loss of government control. While Arafat's people continued to enjoy their status as middlemen between the Palestinian and Israeli economies—and to fill their own pockets—their actual hold over the streets of Gaza or Bethlehem was eroded

daily. The outcome was a crisis of governance. The Authority became ineffective with regard to municipal services, education, and upholding of the rule of law, and the old clans stepped gingerly into the vacuum. When the “Second Intifada” erupted in 2000, they were poised as the most viable governing structures in place. Many observers noted that a new young leadership was coming to the fore and taking over from Arafat and the old guard, but the more significant development, which eluded the attention of most analysts at the time, was the resurgence of the clans. In city, village, and semi-nomad community, with the waning of central authority and as access to economic and political resources became strained, clans were the only social institutions able to cope with the challenges, provide for the hungry, and defend the weak.

This second Intifada also witnessed the breakup of Palestinian security services into ever smaller splinter groups headed by local commanders—or, more often, by self-appointed warlords, thugs, and bullies. Boundaries between the role these groups played in maintaining public order, their struggle against occupation, their squabbles with local adversaries, and their operating as simple crime gangs were blurred beyond recognition. But there was a conspicuous advantage for the clans in this anarchy. While formerly it was impossible to take on the powerful security organizations, now their splinters were small enough for some families to mount effective defenses against them, and even to take them on. The result was a gradual emergence of the Dughmush-style armed fighting family, sometimes joining forces with other clans and using such generic *noms de guerre* as the “Army of Islam.”

Primed by years of political, military, and economic hardship, a few clans became effective fighting forces, with a large group of able-bodied men at their disposal and a stash of weapons smuggled in or bought, or held by moonlighting members of paramilitary organizations. As tensions between Hamas and Fatah escalated in recent years, both groups began to rely on local clans to support their troops. In the Gaza region, stronger families could even rent out their military arm as a source of mercenary revenue.<sup>10</sup> While most familial coalitions retained their independence and eschewed attempts to incorporate them, others, as a result of pressure, local interests, or perceived benefits, identified with one side or the other. One such example is the Gaza-based Hillis family, who joined forces with Fatah, fell out with it on the eve of its defeat in Gaza, but remained suspect in the eyes of Hamas. In October 2007, Hamas authorities decided to detain some of its members and disarm it. They encountered tenacious resistance and were finally forced to retreat and allow the clan to hold on to its weapons.

## The Present and Future of Clans in Palestinian Politics

In the larger and more open cities, such as Ramallah, clans today usually operate below the surface. People go about their daily business not concerned with the clan origins of their neighbors or with their relative power. Yet, whether you are a software developer or a carpenter, that power is almost always present. Clans may be big or small, very important or less so, but they are invariably anchors of individual identity. This is not always the case. Some Palestinians—remnants of a kin group that has shriveled away; people shunned by their own families for committing crimes or for collaboration with the enemy; those born out of wedlock or to prostitutes—have no family to speak of. Unless they find a way to hitch themselves to a clan, these individuals remain on the fringes of society, unprotected and vulnerable.

In the very difficult current situation in the Territories, clans function primarily as welfare institutions. A successful family functioning in this role will own a lucrative business venture or control some other resource. The Abu Samhadna clan in Rafah, for instance, controls most of the underground tunnels operation smuggling guns, tobacco, and people from Egypt into the Gaza Strip. Families in other regions own a group of stores, a gas station, or agricultural land or are in charge of a municipal department

Another attribute of flourishing families is their ability to solve the many daily problems of their members. In the absence of serious medical care in Gaza, for example, the ability to call an Egyptian or Israeli official and ask for a patient to be transferred to a hospital outside the Gaza Strip is important. Obtaining a permit to bring in a visitor—say, a nonresident wife or an old uncle—from the outside is another way to demonstrate power. Those clans who cannot assist in such matters lose face and standing in society.

Clans are also mediating bodies in a society that has little law enforcement capability and few social welfare institutions. When a car accident occurs, or when someone is wounded or killed, an inter-clan mediation process kicks in. In most cases the offending clan will approach dignitaries of some standing known for their knowledge of the law and ask them to “put on the clan’s clothes,” so to speak, and mediate on their behalf with the other clan or clans. Mediation often begins with setting the terms of a truce (*atwa*). The final phase of negotiations is often a

public meeting of the clans involved in the dispute, during which a final settlement (*sulha*) is negotiated.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, strong clans offer protection from harassment and attacks. Offenders will think twice before attacking a house or robbing a store that belongs to a powerful clan. Clan protection also provides a kind of insurance against abuse by government officials and by members of other clans, from bribery and extortion to outright confiscation of property and livelihood.

The requirements for maintaining effective family control lead families to seek avenues of collaboration with the powers that be. Many clans have representatives in the stronger political/military factions in their area. A typical clan will have several of its sons join Hamas, while others will join Fatah or one of the other political groupings. Less often a family throws in its lot with one party, in the hope that its unconditional loyalty will be rewarded. In some cases, despite the stigma of collaboration and the sensitivities attaching to it, clan leaders quietly maintain good relations with the Israeli military in the area, offering information or a promise of calm in return for assistance in crucial matters.

The mere fact that any government in control of the West Bank or Gaza seeks ways to minimize the resistance of the clans to its activities and policies means that clans have an important impact on politics. Every Hamas or Fatah member is first and foremost a member of his or her family. When the organization acts in a manner that contradicts the interests of the clan, in most cases the individual will side with the family rather than with the organization. Astute organizational policy, therefore, seeks the good will of the clans. Under these conditions it is also clear that a Palestinian government cannot have a monopoly on the use of force, but rather must accept that other groupings control smaller paramilitary organizations.<sup>12</sup>

In a society with formal, embedded codes of honor, this also means that every person killed in battle between political organizations creates a vendetta situation between that organization and the victim’s clan. When in June 2007, several Fatah members were killed by Hamas during the takeover of the Gaza Strip, the Hamas leadership knew that there was a danger of a long-term blood feud with the families of these people. In order to preempt such a situation, Hamas leader Khaled Mashal apologized and described these killings as “the acts of individuals,” thereby declaring the organization innocent of them. It should be noted, however, that the clans did not rush to blame Hamas or demand retribution. They must have realized that they may stand to gain more from Hamas’s good will if they are to survive the extreme hardships of the current situation.

As long as the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas persists in the absence of one strong, unified government, the clans will continue to pose multiple challenges to the Palestinian leadership, constraining its ability to govern while adding to the impression of anarchy. Now that Hamas has taken over in Gaza and Fatah seems to be more in control in the West Bank, perhaps there will be a short-term lull in this trend, as each of these organizations asserts its leadership. But in the longer run, while Israeli occupation continues and the governments in both areas remain shaky; clans will continue to be the population's protectors and a force to be reckoned with.

## Clans and a Future Israeli-Palestinian Political Settlement

Clans may be aligned for tactical reasons with one party or with its rival; they may instruct their members to vote for one or another specific party in elections; and their foot soldiers are sure to have strong political views of one sort or another. But in national politics, unless they perceive clear gains from a particular strategic alignment, clans remain suspicious and allow themselves to be courted by all sides. Such a policy guarantees the support of family members with a range of political views and keeps all options open. Besides, the state may be viewed as an obstacle to a clan's economic profit, and the government's local representatives may be rivals in the struggle for resources and power. So from a purely interest-driven vantage point, clans tend to oppose efficient government. Such tensions may arise, when Abu Mazen's forces try to reestablish Palestinian Authority control in the framework of an Annapolis-based agreement—or whenever, by agreement or through the use of force, the Authority attempts to disarm the clans and reassert its responsibility for security in Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>13</sup>

Yet although resisting the state is in the clans' interest, the organizational structure and mechanisms of clans are not conducive to active involvement in the political arena. Unless the leaders of a clan have a direct stake in national politics (for example, as government ministers), in most cases the clan will not oppose changes, as long as no concrete challenge to their power base emerges. It may therefore be possible for Abbas's government to harness the power of clans to assist in the implementation of government policy in the framework of a political settlement. Interacting with the heads of families, identifying their interests and responding to their needs, consulting with them on the finer points of implementation in the local arena, and recognizing their role as conduits for their members' concerns may all be crucial elements in the execution of such a policy. A wise government should even contemplate allowing the clans to keep some of their weapons and defense systems, and recruiting them to assist the government's efforts.

Conversely, ignoring the clans, alienating their leadership, or refusing to interact with them may result in failure to assert any governmental control, and might allow oppositional organizations aiming to disrupt the political process to move in. Such policies might thereby have a disastrous long-term effect.

In sum, if it is to succeed in establishing a functioning government and in concluding an agreement, the Palestinian Authority may find it necessary to ally itself with the families of the West Bank and Gaza—and, in a sense, to share governmental power with them. Indeed, efficient incorporation of some clans may be critical for success. Yet, we should also bear in mind that sharing power with the clans comes at a steep price. As mentioned above, in the long run clan interests do not jibe with those of the state, and powerful families will eventually pose a threat to any government. The price of this cooperation will be a society that is more decentralized, more conservative, and inimical to the politics of individual rights.

## Endnotes

Beyond the referenced works, this article is based on a series of interviews conducted with several people in Jerusalem and the West Bank. For obvious reasons, some of the people I spoke to would like to remain unnamed. I would like to thank Professor Adnan Musallam of Bethlehem University and Mr. Abu Walid Al-Dajjani of Jerusalem for helping clarify many of the issues. Needless to say, all the claims made in this brief are mine.

1 Abraham Rabinovich, "Palestine: Hamas Denies Paying Captors to Free BBC Journalist," *Straits Times*, July 7, 2007.\*

2 Avi Issacharoff, "Four Killed in Hamas, Fatah Clashes in Gaza," *Haaretz*, October 21, 2007\*; Hisham Abu Taha, "Renewed Gaza Clan-Police Clashes Kill 2," *Arab News*, October 21, 2007.\*

3 Cf. Andrew Shryock, *National History and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Shryock, "Popular Genealogical Nationalism: History Writing and Identity among the Balqa Tribes of Jordan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 2 (April 1995): pp. 325–57, and Scott Atran, "Hamula Organisation and Masha'a Tenure in Palestine," *Man*, new series, 21, no. 2 (June 1986): pp. 271–95.

4 See Khawla Abu Baker, *A Rocky Road: Arab Women as Political Leaders in Israel* (in Hebrew) (Raanana, Israel: Institute for Israeli Arab Studies, 2000): p. 104; Joel S. Migdal, "The Effects of Regime Policies on Social Cohesion and Fragmentation," in Migdal et al., *Palestinian Society and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980): p. 72; Omar Karmi, "Weary, Guarded Hope in Gaza," *Middle East Report Online*, February 8, 2005; and Danny Rubinstein, "The Clans are Coming Back," *Haaretz*, December 1, 1995.

5 Atran, "Hamula Organisation," pp. 271–72. See also Alexander Schölch, "Was There a Feudal System in Ottoman Lebanon and Palestine?" in David Kushner, ed., *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social, and Economic Transformation* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1986): p. 141; James Reilly, "The Peasantry of Late Ottoman Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1981): pp. 90–91; and Dror Ze'evi, *An Ottoman Century: The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996): pp. 35–62, 87–114.

6 In many of the refugee camps, splinters of clans realigned themselves, often under the name of the village or area they came from, and formed new familial structures.

7 Majid Al-Haj, "The Changing Arab Kinship Structure: The Effect of Modernization on Urban Community," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 36, no. 2 (January 1988): pp. 237–58. See also Philip Carl Salzman, "Ideology and Change in Middle Eastern Tribal Societies," *Man*, new series, 13, no. 4. (December 1978): pp. 630–31.

8 The best-known attempt to marginalize the old, senior clans and replace them with the second, rural tier occurred during the "Village Unions" period. In the early 1980s, under Moshe Dayan's ministry, the army encouraged smaller clans, under the leadership of former Jordanian minister Mustafa Dodeen (a Palestinian from the district of Hebron), to assist in ruling the Territories as Israel's proxies. The experiment failed.

9 Celia E. Rothenberg, "A Review of the Anthropological Literature in English on the Palestinian Hamula and the Status of Women," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 2 (1998/99): pp. 32–33. Salim Tamari, "Building Other People's Homes," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 11–12, no. 1: pp. 31–66.

10 Lorin Peters, "Hebron: An Independent Palestinian View of Fatah and Hamas," CPNet, September 13, 2007.\*

11 Sharon Lang, "Sulha Peacemaking and the Politics of Persuasion," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2002): pp. 52–66.

12 Steven Erlanger, "In Unruly Gaza, Clans Compete in Power Void," *New York Times*, October 17, 2005.\*

13 A similar situation may develop if the situation is reversed and Hamas takes over from Fatah in the West Bank.



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