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في ضوء التغيرات والثورات العربية

Working Paper

**Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyyah in Lebanon
and the Palestinian Issue**

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Al-Jama‘ah Al-Islamiyyah in Lebanon and the Palestinian issue

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In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

The Palestinian issue has always been an absolute priority for al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah in Lebanon, since its inception in the mid-twentieth century. This was nothing out of the ordinary for Islamist groups, especially those that branched out from the mother group, the Muslim Brotherhood. To be sure, Palestine and *al-Aqsa Mosque* are the heart of the nation and its bleeding wound, and lies at the heart of its creed and beliefs.

Other factors have increased al-Jama‘ah’s involvement in the Palestinian issue, including the presence of a large number of Palestinian refugees in various parts of Lebanon, and the open-ended confrontation between resistance factions, whether nationalist or Islamist, and Israel in occupied Lebanese territory all the way to the border with occupied Palestine.

To further explain the experience of al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah in Lebanon with the Palestinian issue, I will attempt to elaborate on three main axes:

1. The status of the Palestinian issue in the ideology and policies of al-Jama‘ah.
2. Al-Jama‘ah and the Palestinian issue from a practical perspective (activities and events).
3. The influence of major transformations and the Arab Spring wave of uprisings on the priorities of al-Jama‘ah’s involvement in the Palestinian issue, particularly:
 - a- The events of 2005 and the Syrian exit from Lebanon.
 - b- The Arab Spring wave of uprisings and the Syrian revolution in particular.

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The first axis: The status of the Palestinian issue in the ideology and policies of al-Jama‘ah:

Throughout its history, no political project proposed by al-Jama‘ah to its members and supporters came devoid of items pertaining to the Palestinian issue. Similarly, its educational curriculums at the heart of its members’ training never omitted this central issue, based on the following core principles:

1. Palestine is an Arab-Muslim land, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. No part of it may be conceded under any circumstances, and no matter how long the occupation may last.
2. The illegitimacy of the state of Israel, which must never be recognized, nor its presence on all or part of Palestine.
3. The liberation of Palestine is an Islamic duty, a Palestinian duty, a pan-Arab duty, and an international-humanitarian duty, in accordance with the principles of justice and fairness. Action for Palestine, be it with patriotic, Arab, Islamic, or humanitarian motives, must be integrated and harmonious, and never conflicting.
4. The Zionist project is a racist, aggressive, settler-colonial, expansionist project, based on the usurpation of the rights of others, and one that is hostile to the aspirations of the Palestinian people to freedom, return to their land, and self-determination.
5. The Zionist project is a threat to the Arab and Muslim nation, especially the countries surrounding Palestine. This project is hostile to the aspirations of the nation to liberation, renaissance, and unity, and is a project that cannot live and prosper unless the countries surrounding it are weak, torn apart, and backwards. Furthermore, the Arab-Islamic renaissance project cannot be completed without the removal of Israel from Palestine. For this reason, our struggle against this project is existential and not merely one over borders.
6. We are not fighting the Jews for being Jewish, but we are fighting the Zionist Jewish aggressors who usurped Palestine, drove out its people, and desecrated its holy sites; we will fight any party or group that attempts to occupy our lands and usurp our rights, no matter its religion or ethnicity.

7. There can be no compromise on Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine, a religiously, emotionally, and culturally invaluable place for all Arabs and Muslims, and the symbol of their dignity and pride. There is no value for all the actions taken by the Israeli occupation for the 'Judaization' of the city to alter the facts on the ground, and we will spare no means to liberate Jerusalem and restore its standing and role as a center for peaceful coexistence, and its contribution to civilization.
8. There can be no compromise on the right of return of the Palestinian refugees, to the land from whence they were driven, in 1948 and then again in 1967. Even if they were compensated for the damage resulting from their dispossession and the occupation of their land, this will not invalidate or detract from their right to return to these lands.

The second axis: Al-Jama‘ah and the Palestinian issue from a practical perspective (activities and events):

Based on the core principles detailed above, al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah’s has been involved in all facets of the Palestinian issue, whether inside Palestine or in Lebanon, and at all levels:

At the political level: The Palestinian issue has been present in all the political documents that were prepared by al-Jama‘ah , the most recent of which dates back to 2010. Under the title of “the Palestinian issue and the role of the resistance,” the document states:

“What is happening in Lebanon is inseparable from the struggle with the Zionist enemy, and the biased attitudes and actions of the United States in support of Israel. The Zionist project in the region constitutes the biggest threat to our nation and our country, as it seeks to tear apart the Arab and Islamic nations by instigating all kinds of sedition -- sectarian, ethnic, and factional -- and internal wars.

Proceeding from this, we consider confronting this threat and its implications as Arabs, Muslims, and Lebanese, a religious and patriotic duty. Israel continues to occupy all of Palestine and a part of our land, violating our skies, waters, and threatening us morning and evening. Since

this enemy is perched upon our borders then this means that we have a huge responsibility to confront this project, especially when it comes to mobilizing the nation and raising its awareness about the Zionist threat, which poses a danger to its very existence. We must also work to build a society of resistance, in both ideology and practice, in coordination with Lebanese and Palestinian resistance factions, led by Hamas, to resist this threat by all means possible.”

Another paragraph in the same document, titled “The issue of civil rights,” states:

“It must be noted that some Lebanese laws exhibit despicable racial discrimination towards the Palestinians, under false pretenses based on rejecting the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. But this is a principle that enjoys consensus among both Palestinians and Lebanese, and we do not need to, in order to affirm it, enact unjust laws that are inconsistent with fraternal and cordial principles, and with human rights sanctioned by international charters. Based on this, we believe in the necessity of supporting just Palestinian causes in Lebanon, led by the drive to amend the laws that have denied the Palestinians many of their civil and human rights, and expedite the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp.”

At the political level as well, al-Jama‘ah has firmly stood against bids for peace settlements with Israel, and treaties for concession and surrender to Israel. Al-Jama‘ah thus opposed the two such treaties signed by Egypt and Jordan in Camp David and Wadi ‘Arabah with the Israeli occupation force, because they contained implicit recognition and legitimization of Israel’s usurpation of Arab lands. Furthermore, these treaties create a divide among the countries of the region; prevent their peoples from carrying out their duties and roles towards the liberation of Palestine; and allows Israel to grow stronger, expand in the region, further oppress the Palestinians, and alter the identity of the rest of Palestine through ‘Judaization’, especially Jerusalem. These treaties also encourage normalization with Israel and make it easier for the latter to infiltrate and dominate the Arab region.

Al-Jama‘ah has also staunchly opposed the Oslo Accords, signed officially between the PLO and Israel in 1993, and which established the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (GS) in return for the PLO’s recognition of Israel’s right to exist, and the legitimization of its occupation of more than 77% of historical Palestine, while relinquishing armed resistance and ending the *Intifadah*.

This is far as the political level is concerned. At the organizational and practical levels, al-Jama‘ah has taken it upon itself to build a generation that believes in the inevitability of the liberation of every inch of Palestine, creating educational curriculums for the purpose of enshrining this culture. Al-Jama‘ah used various Palestinian occasions to organize festivals, seminars, and exhibitions that serve this idea and spread it among the people of Lebanon throughout the country. Also for this purpose, al-Jama‘ah used all available means, including radio stations, Friday sermons, magazines, and various types of publications and literature, to shed light on the Palestinian issue and its strategic status. Nor did al-Jama‘ah overlook the arts to promote this culture, organizing plays, concerts, drawing competitions, and various other events to reaffirm the core principles related to the Palestinian issue.

With the situation in Palestine witnessing dramatic developments, specifically with the outbreak of the second *Intifadah* and the struggle against Israel entering an advanced stage, al-Jama‘ah also developed its methodology for its advocacy for Palestine, to keep pace with the developments in the occupied territories.

To this end, al-Jama‘ah founded an institution dubbed *Al-Aqsa* Solidarity Organization, assigning only the best of its cadres and leaders to the latter. This organization had immense contributions in taking advocacy for Palestine forward by large strides, whether at the level of financial support which the organization secured through fund raising from Lebanese donors and then transferred to Palestine, or at the level of popular activism in solidarity with our steadfast brethren in Palestine against the occupation. These efforts grew steadily, culminating during the Israeli blockade of GS and subsequent assault on it during the 2008–2009 operation Cast Lead.

Al-Aqsa Solidarity Organization took part in many convoys bound for GS to break the siege, and launched other marches bound for *al-Aqsa* Mosque in Jerusalem,

which would reach the farthest possible border point with occupied Palestine. The organization also participated in the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, where Lebanese donors helped purchase a cargo ship, which was then placed at the disposal of the committee organizing the flotilla in Europe.

Al-Jama‘ah did not limit itself to its own work through *al-Aqsa* Solidarity Organization. Because the scope and scale of the work required to further the Palestinian issue is more than any one particular group can undertake by itself, al-Jama‘ah entered into partnerships with various Lebanese, Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim organizations. For instance, al-Jama‘ah participated in the foundation of several institutions involved in advocacy and support for the Palestinian issue, including relief, cultural, and youth organizations, as well as scholarly organizations and many other kinds of institutes that have since had an extensive role in supporting the Palestinian issue.

The third axis: The influence of major transformations on the priorities of al-Jama‘ah’s involvement in the Palestinian issue:

Lebanon underwent two major junctures that had a huge effect on the course of events in this country:

First: The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005.

Second: The Arab Spring wave of uprisings, particularly the revolution in Syria.

Following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, the Lebanese arena saw an unprecedented ‘vertical’ split, where the sharp political polarization affected most segments of the Lebanese people, and only a small minority of political and popular forces remained unaffected by this divide. Worse still, this split took on a sectarian character in the Islamic arena in particular, where the majority of the Shiite community is in favor of the camp loyal to the regime in Syria, while the majority of the Sunni community is supportive of the camp opposed to this regime.

This reality did not alter the priorities of al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah with regard to the Palestinian issue. But the response of the Lebanese people in general to our

invitations to attend Palestine-related events no longer enjoys the same momentum, as a result of urgent internal concerns taking precedence for a large segment of people. However, this does not reflect a shift in the convictions of the Lebanese, as much as it highlights their increased focus on urgent matters that temporarily have a higher priority. This is evidenced by the fact that during major developments in Palestine, such as the brutal assault on GS in 2008–2009, the Lebanese arena once again mobilized with full momentum, forgetting its internal priorities.

Meanwhile, the Arab uprisings have not had any negative impact on advocacy for the Palestinian issue, with the exception of the Syrian revolution. Indeed, the latter has taken precedence, whether at the level of al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah and its institutions, or public opinion. However, this precedence is not the result of the renunciation of the Palestinian issue, or a change in principles and strategic goals, but is one related to the tragedy in Syria and its sheer magnitude. To be sure, Syrian lives have been disregarded in numbers and ways that exceeded all expectations. Furthermore, tens of thousands of Syrian refugees have come to Lebanon, creating a huge and immediate burden on al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah and all Lebanese to shoulder their responsibilities towards their Syrian brethren, who never shirked their duties towards Lebanon or the Palestinian issue.

This, without a doubt, took its toll on part of the efforts meant to advance the Palestinian issue, but without this meaning that the mother of causes has been abandoned. This is clear during major developments in the occupied territories, when the Palestinian issue immediately returns to the forefront of concerns and efforts. The Israeli aggression in the past few days is the best proof of this, and it is truly astounding how the people of GS and all of occupied Palestine protested in support of the Syrian people who are being slaughtered, only for the Syrians to return the favor and stand firmly in support of the Palestinians against the brutal Israeli aggression. Such is the image of the one nation, which rejoices when other parts of it rejoice, and weep when other parts of it weep.

Conclusion:

Brothers, the Palestinian issue has been and always will be the central cause for us as an Islamist movement that believes in the inevitability of confrontation with, and victory against, Israel. As for the Arab uprisings and the seminal internal

developments, these are but temporary and fleeting events that may consume some of our time and efforts, but will never delay us from focusing on the mother of our causes. On the contrary, we believe that these events will pave the way for full fusion among the peoples of this nation, a fusion that the oppressive regimes prevented for too long, and a fusion that will serve as the true beginning of the liberation of Palestine, all of Palestine. “...on that Day shall the Believers rejoice- With the help of Allah. He helps whom He will, and He is exalted in might, most merciful.” (Al-Rum: 4-5).