

# The Islamic Movement in Israel: New Reality as an Underground Organization

Shaul Bartal

Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

On November 15, 2015, the Israeli Defense Minister, Moshe (Boogi) Ya'alon, declared the Islamic Movement, headed by Sheikh Ra'ed Salah Mahajna, an illegal organization. This step came as a surprise as the Islamic Movement had been active since 1996 despite the fact that its leaders were arrested from time-to-time. Up until 2015, the movement had never been declared illegal. This article compares and contrasts the organization's activities both before and after it become illegal (1996-2017).

*Keywords:* Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, the Islamic Movement in Israel, Hamas, *al-Murābitoun*, temple mount

## Introduction

In 1948, after the Israeli War of Independence and after losing the leadership of the Supreme Muslim Council (an institution combining Islam with a Palestinian form of Arab nationalism during the British Mandate period), the Muslim community in Israel was in stagnation. It was only after 1967, when the Islamic Movement (IM) was founded by young, educated Arabs living in Israel, that Islam was rediscovered (Peled, 1996, pp. 278-279). Many young people, including Arab-Israelis, integrated into the religious institutions in the West Bank. The most prominent among these youth were Sheikh Ra'ed Salah Mahajna and Sheikh Kamal al-Khatib who later became leaders of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel (NIM).<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, Ra'ed Salah studied at the Islamic Institute in Hebron (today Hebron University). During his college years, he stood out as a political activist and even founded the Islamic block which supported Muslim Brotherhood activity at that time. Afterwards, this position was filled by Sheikh Kamal al-Khatib (2011).

In 1979, after the Iranian Revolution, the IM in Israel emerged as part of the growth of the Salafist Islamic movements. During the 1980s, a vibrant Islamic movement emerged to mobilize the 700,000 Muslim Israelis who were citizens of the Jewish state at that time. Over the years, activists of this stream, led by Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, emphasized their sensitivity on any Islamic topic—especially in regard to the holy places in Jerusalem with the al-Aqsa Mosque at the top of the list. In the scope of its activities, the NIM created subsidiary organizations such as the *al-Murābitoun* and the *al-Murābaṭāt* [The Defenders] whose main duty was to harass

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Shaul Bartal, PhD, Research Associate, Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Research, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel; Instituto do Oriente (IO), Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal.

<sup>1</sup> During the 90s, the IM in Israel separated into two streams. The first stream (SIM) was led by Sheikh Abdullah Nimer Darwish and Ibrahim Sarsur from Kfar Kassem (which is found in the southern part of the area nicknamed “The Triangle”). The second stream (NIM), under the leadership of Sheikh Ra'ed Salah and Kamaal al-Khatib, objected to becoming integrated politically in Israel. They were located in the Wadi 'Ara, in other words in the north of the “Triangle”. This is the root of the differentiation between the two streams. Practically, however, supporters of both factions can be found throughout the country.

groups of Jews visiting and touring the Temple Mount *al-Haram al-Šarīf* (Shragai, 2020). Their other activities included contact and aid to Hamas activists who carried out armed operations (Bartal, 2016a). On November 15, 2015, the Israeli government declared the NIM to be an illegal organization. The purpose of this article is to examine this decision and to see if this and the additional steps taken against the head of the organization and its organizational activities had any effect on the organization and its activities. This will be carried out by examining the organization's activities and ideas before and after they were declared illegal.

This article is a pioneer in this field and is unique in its attempt to analyze the developments that the NIM faced by comparing the influence of the transition from a legitimate organization (until November 2015), even though it was a controversial one, to one which was persecuted due to its opinions, speeches, and activities which also included violent activities. The conclusions of this research can serve as a basis for testing the dynamics of the Islamic organization in additional countries as well.

### **The Roots of the Islamic Movement in Israel**

The establishment of Israel in 1948 created a change in demographics due to the influx of a large Islamic population into the state of Israel. The Muslim minority (especially the older population) remembered (or heard stories about) life before the establishment of the State of Israel when the land was with a Muslim majority and the Jews were a minority who only made up between 10%-15% of the population in the land (Watzal, 1999; Zureik, 2016). In light of this, IM decided that one of its goals was to return to that previous time, either through violence or cultural and social means, until the Muslim world woke up and succeeded in returning Palestine to the bosom of Islam. This belief is general in all the Palestinian Islamic groups in Israel and Palestine. They are divided only on the way to achieve this goal.

The NIM in Israel passed through four main periods in its formation.

1. Up to 1979-1985: A terror organization under the name "*Usrat al-Jihad*" [the Holy War Family]. Abdalla Nimer Darwish founded the movement with other enthusiastic young Muslims. In 1981, together with the other young Muslims, he was convicted of membership in a terrorist organization. They were all released from prison in May 1985 as part of prisoner-exchange deal (Sorek, 2015).

2. 1985-1996: The United Islamic movement headed by Abdullah Nimer Darwish. Signs of a rift between members began to appear due to opposition to the direction the organization was taking—one which forbade *jihad* and believed that all religious and political activities needed to be within the scope of Israeli law (Peleg & Waxman, 2011, pp. 55-56).

3. 1996-2015: A period of parallel activities for the two streams, both of which only carried out legitimate activities. Both streams used religious preaching in order to reach their audiences. The NIM was blunter and boycotted the Israeli election. It also provoked law enforcement authorities and organized protests against the authorities, some of which were violent, especially in Jerusalem and the area around the Temple Mount (Peleg & Waxman, 2011, pp. 79-83). The SIM continued with the integrative orientation with the state. Darwish highlighted the shared citizenship when he promised to get back the confiscated lands through a peaceful, legal, civilized, and conscious struggle with the participation of the honorable citizens of the state, Arabs, and Jews (Sorek, 2015, pp. 60-61).

4. Illegal Activities (November 2015-Present): Attempts by the NIM to use violence. In 2020, Ra'ed Salah was imprisoned again for encouraging and supporting terror attacks by his followers. The spirit of incitement undoubtedly contributed to the July 2017 murder of two Druze police officers in Jerusalem by two Arabs from

Umm al-Fahm, Salah's hometown. He also accused Israel of conspiring to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque and denying free Muslim worship on the Temple Mount (even though the Muslim waqf or endowment has administered this most sacred religious site for the Jewish people since 1967) (Nisan, 2020; Asmar, 2020). According to Muslim Brotherhood theology and scholars like Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradāwi, the Israeli victories in 1948 and 1967 were "punishment from Allah" for the nationalistic regimes of Egypt and Syria which had abandoned the way of Islam. The Israel-Arab conflict was seen as a conflict that included religious elements and not just nationalistic one. To them, only a return to Islam would enable the Islamic nations to become victorious over their common enemy—read Israel and world Zionism (Al-Qaradāwi, 1993). This approach slowly trickled down into Israeli-Arab consciousness. From the 1970s onward, the deep Islamic streams existing within the Palestinian centers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip began to become popular. In 2013, Ra'ed Salah declared that "al-Qaradāwi is the head of all the Islamic sages in the entire world. He is the highest and most thorough authority for the entire Muslim *umma* today. For all the Islamic scholars, its believers, and the public." (Bartal & Robinstein-Shemer, 2018, p. 127). The relationship between al-Qaradāwi and Sheikh Ra'ed Salah can be described as pupil to master.

### **After the 1996 Split: Working within Israeli Law**

The IM in Israel was founded at the end of the 1970s. Like other Islamist groups, they believed that Islam had to be adopted as a way of life. As the young Muslims became more religious, the more they wanted a more violent organization. That is why *Usrat al-Jihad*, headed by Abdullah Nimer Darwish from Kafr Kassem and Farid Abu-Moh from Baka'a al-Gharbiyya, was founded. The organization's goal was the establishment of a state on all of Palestine which would be governed according to Islamic law. Their slogan was: "Palestine is the homeland of the Palestinians, Arab land for the nationalist and the faith principle in Islam." (Shragai, 2020, p. 148).

In 1985, the leaders of the organization, Sheikh Abdullah Nimer Darwish and Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, were freed as part of the Ahmed Jibril deal.<sup>2</sup> From this time onward, the movement adopted a more integrative line although they asked Israel to apologize for its past crimes and defended al-Aqsa in different ways without the actual use of violence. They thus fitted into the espoused Islamic vision of working within the constraints of Israeli society. The more modest and pragmatic goals of the organization were to strengthen "an Islamic way of life" for Palestinian Muslims in Israel, maintain the Palestinian presence on its land, and to preserve Islamic holy sites. Ra'ed Salah himself was elected and served as the mayor of Umm al-Fahem (1989-2001) and worked well with the Ministry of Interior (Rekness, 1993; Meyer, 1988; Tal, 2000).

During the 90s, a crisis hit the IM under the leadership of Sheikh Darwish. The SIM, led by Sheikh Darwish and Ibrahim Sarsur (and which is currently led by Sheikh Hamed Abu Daabas and Mansour Abbas) favored participation in Israeli politics through Knesset elections. Those belonging to this stream also supported the Oslo Agreements and argued that it was necessary to support the efforts of the PLO in order to have a Palestinian representative (Al-Atawneh & Ali, 2018). The NIM opposed participation in national elections for ideological and political reasons. Ideologically, Sheikh Salah argued that the movement should not participate in a political system that is not based on *shari'ā*. His political concern was that participation in national elections would weaken the IM unique contract with the people by making it "just another Arab party and that

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<sup>2</sup> Prisoner exchange (May 21, 1985): Israel released 1,150 security prisoners held in Israeli prisons in exchange for three Israeli prisoners (Yosef Grof, Nissim Salem, Hezi Shai) who were captured during the First Lebanon War.

it would mean getting into the ‘dirty business’ of politics. It would also make the movement dependent on government resources, and thus provide the state with control over its activities. Finally, it would force the movement to swear allegiance to the state and to its (Jewish) symbols and (Zionist) agenda.” (Rosmer, 2010, p. 194).

After the split within the IM (in 1996), the NIM increasingly focused on Jerusalem and its holy places. This activity awarded it great popularity throughout the Arab world. Sheikh Salah was described as Sheikh al-Aqsa and the NIM slogan was “*al-Aqsa fi al-khater*: Al-Aqsa in Danger” (Shragai, 2012; Papp é 2011). The British-Palestinian journalist, Zaki Chehab, even reported that he once recorded Sheikh Salah touring the tunnels. According to his argument, the tour’s purpose (Chehab, 2007, p. 29) was to gradually erode the foundations of al-Aqsa and lead to the collapse of the mosques there. This recording was later passed on to Yasser Arafat enabling him to receive international pressure for ending the Israeli digging (Chehab, 2007, p. 29).

### **The Connection between the NIM and Terror**

As we see above, the roots of the IM were as a terrorist organization named *Usrat al-Jihad*. In addition, from time-to-time IM activists participated in violent actions even before the split in 1996. In February 1992, three Israeli Arabs from the area of Umm al-Fahm, the stronghold of the NIM in the future, infiltrated a military base near Kibbutz Gilad and cruelly massacred three soldiers (Rekheess, 1993, pp. 74-75).

The idea of *jihad* against Israel was already expressed in the movement’s journal, *As-Sirāt [The Straight Path]*, during the first intifada (1987-1993), a period during which Sheikh Salah served as a writer and editor of the newspaper. Below is a sample of such an article:

*Jihad* warrior wake up!!! Akko and its beaches are calling you! Don’t sink into a deep sleep!!! Come and protect your rivers!!! ...We cannot forget the pioneer role of Hamas in Palestine against the occupation forces in that it injected the needed fervor into the masses in order to expel the occupiers from the Holy Land and raise the flag of Allah in its place...It is up to the fighters of the *intifada* to turn their lands into a *jihad* arena which will burn with an everlasting flame against the crazy dogs. It is up to the fighters for Islam to free Palestine and establish the rule of Allah on the Muslims and to answer the calls for *jihad* in order to win or die. (As-Sirāt, 1989, pp. 187-188)

From time to time, the NIM continued supporting and carrying out terrorist activities. In August 1999, Abdallah Aghbariya, from the village Musheirifa, an Arab village in Israel’s Wadi Ara region, murdered a couple hiking in a forest in northern Israel because he “wanted to kill Jews” (Shragai, 2020, p. 149; Sedan, 1999). In September 2001, another NIM supporter and Hamas member carried out a suicide attack in Nahariya. According to the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam website, the attacker was Mohammed Shakur Habeishi who was considered one of the prominent activists of the Islamic movement in his village Abu Snan (Anonymous, 2020). In September 1999, two car bombs exploded in Tiberius and Haifa. The footprints led to six Israeli Arabs who were identified with the NIM (Israeli, 1999).

In March 2004, Ashraf Hassan from Kfar Yasif and Khaled Sakran from Tamra, were arrested. During their interrogation they confessed that they belonged to Ra’ed Salah’s branch (the NIM). They had planned on killing a soldier and stealing his weapon. During their interrogation they also confessed that they had planned to carry out this operation near Acre in February 2004 but these plans were foiled when they were arrested.<sup>3</sup> These events and others showed that the NIM never stopped its *jihad* activities against Israel.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ma’ariv*, Mar. 25, 2004.

To Israel, the main problem with the NIM in the 2000s (until it was outlawed,) was its connections with Hamas (Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamaal-Islāmiyya), a terrorist organization.

After the second *intifada* (2000-2005) began, Palestinian intelligence reports noted with concern of the contacts between Hamas leaders in the West Bank and leaders of the NIM, particularly Sheikh Ra'ed Salah. A captain in the Palestinian Preventive Security service reported to his superior:

[My] sources have informed me that two Hamas members, Gassan Harmass and Khalded Tafesh Duweib, initiated contacts with Umm al-Fahm mayor Sheikh Ra'ed Salah. Their aim was to aid in the collection of contributions from Umm al-Fahm, Shefaram, Kfar Kara and Kfar Manda [Israeli Arabs cities] for the Orphan Care Society in the city [of Bethlehem]. (Levitt, 2006, pp. 115-116)

The captain added that the meeting had already resulted in a fundraising event at the Green Mosque in Haifa where \$24,500 was raised (Levitt, 2006, pp. 115-116). On August 22, 2003, the U.S. Treasury Department added Interpal and several other Hamas charities in Austria, France, Switzerland, and Lebanon to its terrorist list. Other European countries, as well as Canada and Australia which followed the Americans, added Interpal and the charitable foundations to their terrorist lists. The ties between Interpal and the Hamas front organizations in the West Bank Gaza and Israel were also carried out via telephone as introduced in the case of Sheikh Ra'ed Salah. Intercepted transcripts revealed that Salah communicated extensively with Interpal officials while laundering and funneling money received from Interpal to Hamas institutions in the West Bank (Levitt, 2006, pp. 157-159). The NIM also received money from the Charity Coalition (*I'tilaf al-Khayr*) founded and headed by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradāwi. The Charity Coalition was declared a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States, and other western countries. Sheikh Ra'ed Salah was on one of the organization's board of trustees (Levitt, 2006, p. 163; Bartal, 2016b, pp. 481-482).

Sheikh Salah organized fundraising campaigns that are estimated to have raised millions of shekels for the Hamas organization. A part of the money was earmarked for military action. As part of the inquiry against him, Sheikh Salah and his followers argued that the money was earmarked for orphans and widows. The sheikh was found guilty and sentenced to three years in prison (Haifa Central Court, 2003). That is why it is not surprising that Hamas journals bestowed upon Sheikh Salah the title "Sheikh al-Aqsa" and even wrote a poem in his honor that described him as "the Dark Nights' Star" (Abu al-Hawa, 2011, p. 33). In June 2011, Ismail Haniyeh named the Gaza stadium the Ra'ed Salah Stadium, "thereby honoring an important Palestinian leader" (Shragai, 2020, p. 148).

Declaring the organization illegal had a lot to do with the continuing ties between Sheikh Salah and Hamas factors and the radical ideology that sees the destruction of the State of Israel as its ideal and the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate with Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque at its center (Pankhurst, 2013, p. 1). The responsibility that the Islamic Movement took for the activities of the *al-Murābitoun* and *al Murābaḡāt* on the Temple Mount also played a role (Cohen, 2017, pp. 8-9). These are men and women who sit on the Temple Mount daily and receive money from the Islamic Movement in order to heckle Jewish groups visiting the Temple Mount. The declaration that the *al-Murābitoun* and *al Murābaḡāt* were illegal (in September 2015), reduced this phenomenon but has not completely prevented it (Liber, 2017; Shragai, 2020, pp. 173-201).

After the split and after the Oslo accords of the 1990s, there was a substantial shift in the projects that the Islamic Movement supported. The first significant conference, "al-Quds First," which was organized in Kafir Kana in 1994, highlighted the cause of al-Aqsa and contributed to the growing role of the movement in issues

related to Jerusalem. This was followed by another significant conference in 1995 in Kafr Qassim, and the movement's role in addressing the al-Aqsa situation which became a key issue in their agenda. Since 1996, "al-Aqsa: in Danger" has become an annual conference organized by the movement and attended by notable figures from the Islamic world (Nasasra, 2018). Umar Muhammad Abeid, a Hamas activist from the 'Isawiyya village in Jerusalem, was one of the participants at this conference. Abeid was charged in 2015, with Hamas membership and terror activities in Jerusalem. He was jailed for six and a half years.

Between 2010-2015, every year we would travel to Umm al-Fahm from 'Isawiyya. Almost 6 buses went there and not only from our village. Lots of youth from the other village including sheikhs, women and children were going there. It was usually between October to December when the conference "al-Aqsa: in Danger" was taking place. Around 50,000 people were there to listen to our Sheikh al-Aqsa. This conference was Hamas organization and was headed by Sheikh Ra'ed Salah and they spoke there about al-Aqsa, Jerusalem, Syria and Israeli Arabs. I have 40 flags of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. All of these I brought home from those conferences.<sup>4</sup>

Other Hamas activists also took part in this conference. In 2013, Majed Guaibe was arrested. Guaibe, from the old city of Jerusalem, was also convicted of "Hamas membership". His media sites were filled with NIM materials. He, together with his friends, also participated in the "al-Aqsa: in Danger" conference.<sup>5</sup> Hamas and both of the IM streams are connected with the Muslim Brotherhood. There was ongoing tension in the NIM as they tried to operate legally within Israel and yet follow the movement's religious principles. This has been called a "dilemma between the local and the global". The global is Hamas and other Muslim Brotherhood groups around the world that support Hamas' resistance against Israel. By getting money through these organizations (Interpal, the Charity Coalition, Muasasat al-Quds al-Dawliyya, and others), that are recognized by Israel, the United States, and other states as terror groups, it was easy to declare the NIM "illegal" (Nasasra, 2018, pp. 70-76; Rayan, 2012, pp. 62-79). In Sheikh Salah's view: "if al-Quds continues to be under occupation, every Muslim in the world is occupied."<sup>6</sup> That is why everybody who is Muslim, including members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad groups, and other Muslim Brotherhood groups, are legitimate partners in the NIM struggle against Israel which includes violent terrorist attacks.

It is possible that declaring the NIM illegal in November 2015 led to the creation of terrorist cells among those supporting the organization who were inspired by the spirit of Sheikh Salah's *jihadist* message. Islamic experts believe that in 2015, the Israeli Secret Service was afraid that this might occur when it decided to declare the organization illegal (Nasasra, 2018, p. 74). It appears as if their fears did indeed come true (Liber, 2017).

The roots of the NIM turning into a terrorist organization were already present earlier. In the indictment served against Sheikh Ra'ed Salah in August 2017, it was indicated that one of the three terrorists who murdered Ha'il Satawi and Kamil Shanani on the Temple Mount on July 14, 2017 managed to say to one of the policemen that he was "from Umm al Fahm and from Ra'ed Salah's group"<sup>7</sup>.

After the attack, an additional activist from the Northern Faction, headed by Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, was also arrested. This arrested activist was Amjad Muhammad Jabarin who confessed that he was the one who had transported the terrorists from Umm al Fahm to Jerusalem to carry out the attack. When he heard their plans, he offered his help (Gross, 2017a).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Umar Abeid, Hamas activist. Al-Issawiya, Jerusalem. Oct. 14, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Majed Guaibe, Hamas activist. Bāb (al-)Huṭṭa, the old city in Jerusalem, Oct. 14, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "Wafd al-Haraka al-Islāmiyyāyatraḥqadiyyat al-Quds fī Malesiā," *Sawt al-Hāqqwa-l-Hurriyyā*, Sept. 21, 2012, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Haifa Shalom Court, Aug. 24, 2017. An indictment against Ra'ed Salah Mahajne. File PM"H 18/5580-17/3205.

According to the Shabak (Israel's Secret Service): "Connections were found between the assailants and the Islamic Movement, including support for the ideas put out by the movement and through their involvement in organizations that have clear links to the Islamic Movement." (Gross, 2017).

It is unclear what degree of influence Sheikh Ra'ed Salah had on those who carried out this attack, but it is clear that the sheikh supported their actions, praised their actions, and described them as being on the highest level possible for the *Shuhadā al-Ma'arakah*—dead martyrs—on the enemy battlefield. On the day of the attack, Sheikh Salah, in his sermon, already praised those who carried it out:

From this pulpit, I would like to stress this position: [The occupation] is responsible for all the injustice we suffer at the al-Aqsa Mosque. Therefore, my brothers, I ask that Allah accept all the martyrs of the al-Aqsa Mosque, and that He unite them [in Paradise] with the prophets, the righteous, the martyrs and the pure. I ask that Allah accept all the female martyrs of the al-Aqsa Mosque, and that He unite them [in Paradise] with the prophets, the righteous, the martyrs and the pure. I ask that Allah accept those who were martyred this morning, the sons of Umm Al-Fahm—Muhammad, Muhammad and Muhammad, and that He unite them [in Paradise] with the prophets, the righteous, the martyrs and the pure. (MEMRI, 2017, <https://www.memri.org/reports/palestinian-reactions-july-14-al-aqsa-attack-weak-condemnation-welcoming-and-justifying-it>)

### **Al-Aqsa in Danger**

Israel's decision to outlaw the NIM was described as a way to silence Sheikh Ra'ed Salah. This idea gained popularity among the Palestinians living in Israel. In a 2012 survey of the Arab adult population, 12.6 percent of the interviewees mentioned that they felt the closest to the NIM movement. In another survey taken in 2012, it was found that 25 percent of the internally displaced Palestinians mentioned the IM more times than any other party or movement (Sorek, 2015, pp. 260-261). The NIM had become stronger and more influential than the SIM, with triple the number of supporters (Sorek, 2015, p. 238). The way to gain popularity was through the fake libel "al-Aqsa in Danger".

Since 2001, Sheikh Ra'ed Salah has concentrated his political activity on becoming the defender of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The ideological infrastructure for the Muslim Brotherhood of Sheikh Ra'ed Salah and his deputy Kamal al-Khatib was learned during their *shari'a* studies in the 1970s and is reflected in their speeches and their "political activities".

The basis for these activities was the belief that the al-Aqsa mosque was in existential danger due to Jewish aspirations to destroy it as soon as possible and build a temple on its ruins, the same imaginary temple that, according to Sheikh Salah, was never there. Every activity carried out by the ruling authorities in Jerusalem, such as building a light rail train was, according to him, part of a systematic plan to bring masses of new Jewish immigrants to the Third Temple that they were planning on building (Ahmad Fathi, 2012; 2009). In a different book, one initiated by the NIM and edited by Mahmud Abu 'Ataa, Israeli crimes in Jerusalem are steps whose purpose, according to the writer of the document, was the Judaization of Jerusalem. For example, the enabling of groups of Jews to visit *al-Haram al-Šarīf* (the Temple Mount) is described as carrying out Talmudic rituals on the al-Aqsa Plaza (Abu-'Ataa, 2009, p. 5).

Over the years, it became clear that the NIM was also responsible for the funding of *al-Murābitoun* and *al-Murābaḡāt* on the Temple Mount. The Sheikh declared this on both the internet site and Facebook page of *Waqf al-Umaah* before the organization was declared illegal. They were also supported by the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) headed by Sheikh Qaradāwi.<sup>8</sup> During Qaradawi's visit to the Gaza Strip in May

<sup>8</sup> *Waqf al-Umaah*, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/ummetvakf/>.

2013, Sheikh Salah, a member of Qaradawi's IUMS board, describes him as a "giant in his generation" (Bartal and Robinstein-Shemer, 2018, p. 127). On the Friday after the metal detectors were removed from the Temple Mount, the Sheikh gave an additional speech at a rally attended by thousands where he praised his organizations' subsidiaries—the *al-Murābitoun* and *al Murābaḩāt*—and those who carried out the riots in Jerusalem:

These groups that stand for the truth are the *al-Murābitoun and al Murābaḩāt*...And what say God's Messenger on them? That they are the ones who defeated their enemies. God, Ho, God's Messenger, it is as if you are living among us in the year 2017. The Israelis and the *al-Murābitoun* [were] and are still at the entrance to the al-Aqsa Mosque. And what does the Prophet say about them as if you are wandering around the Lion's Gate, the Gate of Forgiveness, the Council Gate, as if you are wandering around between Old Jerusalem and Silwan and Wadi al-Juz. God, Oh Messenger of God. Let them overpower their enemies. Whoever has overcome the pride of the Israeli occupation yesterday in a direct broadcast are the *al-Murābitoun and al Murābaḩāt*. Whoever wiped the pride of Netanyahu into dust are the *al-Murābitoun and al Murābaḩāt*. Whoever silenced the unclean, ugly voices which came out [of the mouths] of their leaders [Gilad] Erdan, [Avigdor] Lieberman, [Yoav] Gallant, [Yisrael] Katz and from the whole entire cursed society that claims that it has sovereignty over al-Aqsa. The *al-Murābitoun and al Murābaḩāt* who screamed at them when they were confirmed: The al-Aqsa Mosque belongs to us culturally and historically, it is ours in the past, it is ours now and it will be ours in the future and any occupation that will hurt the al-Aqsa Mosque [indeed its end] will be destruction, will disappear [from the face of the earth when it is] small, pus, a refugee and defeated.<sup>9</sup>

The Sheikh recognizes and knows that it is possible that those who continue on this path will have to sacrifice their blood, but he continues to encourage them to do so:

The Messenger of God, may he rest in peace, says that someone who is different than they are will not hurt them but they will have catastrophes. There is no escaping pain, there is no escaping sacrifices, there is no escaping the great donation. The bigger the sacrifice so rises the value of the person giving the sacrifice [near God] ...Whoever gives a cup of water is not like those who give of their blood.<sup>10</sup>

The sheikh continues to describe the amount of sacrifice in those stormy two weeks in Jerusalem:

During the past week, the *al-Murābitoun and al Murābaḩāt* sacrificed eight martyrs, praise to God, with the help of his name, if we wanted to know their names, we will repeat and say, "Muhammad, Muhammad, Muhammad." [A hint to the symbolism that is identical to the name of the Prophet] It is the will of the exalted Lord. Until now, with the help of God, there are eight martyrs and 1,001 injured.<sup>11</sup>

After the July 14, 2017 attack, Israeli authorities closed the Temple Mount to Muslims for two days. When it reopened, metal detectors had been installed to check those entering the Temple Mount. The heads of the movement, Ra'ed Salah and Kamal Khatib took a significant part in inciting the Muslim public against the steps taken by Israel on the Temple Mount. They called for resistance to Israel's policy of placing machines to check everybody entering from every entrance.

Salah's deputy, Sheikh Kamal Khatib, told *Al-Jazeera* that Israel was using chemicals in its excavations in the area of al-Aqsa which would eventually cause the foundations of the mosque to disintegrate. Israel could then argue that such a collapse was the result of natural causes (The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2017).

The funerals of the terrorists Muhammad Ahmad Jabarin, Muhammad Hamid Abd al-Latif Jabarin, and Muhammad Ahmad Mufdal Jabarin were held in the middle of the night of July 27, 2017. The Sheikh opened

<sup>9</sup> Haifa Shalom Court, Aug. 24, 2017. An indictment against Ra'ed Salah Mahajne. File PM"H 18/5580-17/3205.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

his sermon with words made for events such as this: “Do not consider those killed in the cause of Allah as dead. In fact, they are alive, at their Lord, well provided for.”<sup>12</sup> In front of over 10,000 people, the sheikh inflamed his supporters with cries of “With spirit and with blood we will redeem you al-Aqsa; with spirit and blood we will redeem you martyr.”

In his eulogy he said:

Brothers, at moments like these we can only ask from God, May he be praised and elevated, that he will forgive all the prayer from the depths of our hearts. It is said [praying for all three martyrs]: God pitied them and will forgive them, respect their stay with you, gather them to heaven, the house of peace in peace, unite them with the prophets, the righteous, the martyrs and those who walk a straight path and with those the good heart just as you connected them with their fathers and mothers, their brothers and sisters in this world, that is how they will meet on judgment day. With their high standing in Heaven above, God will offer them a drink of water together with the Prophet Muhammad, may he rest in peace, a drink after which they will never be thirsty again. God will honor them with the company of a messenger from God, may he rest in peace, in the ritual bath of the messenger of God, with the friends of the messenger of God [*Aṣ-ṣaḥābah*—the companions of the Prophet to whom many of the sayings and laws of the Prophet are attributed] – author’s note] with those who continue his way, with the first fathers, the righteous (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*), the good creatures together with those who are righteous and God-fearing on Judgment Day. God, we turn to you, please answer our prayers, please answer our prayers, please answer our prayers.<sup>13</sup>

Sheikh Salah’s words were spoken in an atmosphere of violence and protest in Muslim society in Israel, especially in East Jerusalem, due to the placement of metal detectors at the entrances to the Temple Mount. Due to the wide-spread protests, an agreement was made between Israel and Jordan and the metal detectors were removed (Gross, 2017b).

### **After the Declaration Designating NIM as an Illegal Organization**

From 2001, until the organization was declared illegal, over 20 different non-profit organizations belonging to the Islamic Movement were established. These were active in many different areas starting with protection as well as taking part in the struggle against land confiscations, opposition to the Judaizing of Jerusalem, developing the al-Aqsa legacy and others.

Although the work of the non-profit organizations and the institutions active within the framework of the Islamic Movement were officially closed, it appears that Sheikh Salah and his movement found ways to get around the prohibitions and the limitations through the use of social media to fundraise and through the establishment of non-profit organizations in Lebanon or other places in the Arab world. Thus, for example, the project “Planting Hope” is based on donations from the *Waqf al-Umaah* and the International Jerusalem Institution which is based in Lebanon. *Khadija Khwis*, one of the leaders of the *al-Murābaḥāt*, raises money inside of al-Aqsa for these activities and asks that those who have donated to it should keep in contact through WhatsApp. Thus, they are actually calling Lebanon, a country with whom Israel does not have any official relations.<sup>14</sup>

Declaring the Islamic Movement, the NIM, illegal in November 2015, led to the closing of the official institutes of the organization, including *Sawt al-Haq wa al-Hurriya* (*The Voice of Truth and Freedom*) and the news website PLS48. But Sheikh Salah and his deputy Kamal al-Khatib continued with their activities which

<sup>12</sup> Quran, 3:169.

<sup>13</sup> Haifa Shalom Court, Aug. 24, 2017. An indictment against Ra'ed Salah Mahajne. File PM"H 18/5580-17/3205.

<sup>14</sup> Ra'ed Salah's Facebook page, إرائد صلاح, <https://www.facebook.com/RaaidSalah>, retrieved on Oct. 20, 2020.

included publishing articles on their Facebook page.<sup>15</sup> The articles were also distributed to Hamas websites such as *Markazal-Filasfīnīlil-I'alam* (The Palestine Center for Information) or *al-Risāla* (The Letter). In one of his articles, Sheikh Salah was very proud to say that despite the fact that his organization had been declared illegal, there was no change in his organization. In an article entitled “Netanyahu and his Paranoia”, published on the Hamas site on June 5, 2016, he wrote:

We are remaining who we are and the Islamic Movement remains and grows after it was blocked, the way it did before it was blocked. It holds the same position that it did before it was blocked and we remain holding on with all of our strength to our Palestinian-Arab Islamic presence and we remain winners with all of these proofs but first and foremost is our victory in Jerusalem and [about] the Blessed al-Aqsa Mosque.<sup>16</sup>

Sheikh Salah tried to carry on with the activities of his organization even after it became illegal. On May 11, 2017, six activists from his organization were arrested, among them *Suleiman Aghbariya*, a senior advisor in the Islamic Movement who also served as the organization’s director before it was declared illegal. The six continued the Islamic Movement activities in Jerusalem, including moving funds for the various *al-Murābitoun* and *al Murābaḩāt* activities on the Temple Mount. Two of them were caught as they tried to move \$20,000 to various factors. Due to this activity, the Israeli Secret Service said the following:

The activity of the Islamic Movement endangers the security of the State and any activity related to the movement, including being a member of the group, is prohibited by law. Law enforcement agencies will continue to take the necessary enforcement measures to prevent any activity by the movement and its members. (Ahronheim, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Shin-Bet-nabs-6-Islamic-Movement-members-in-Israel-operatives-490458>)

Nowadays there are still a number of Facebook pages controlled by Sheikh Ra’ed Salah or present items in his name. Some of these disappear due to steps taken by Israeli security which closes them while others pop out all over the place. The social media platforms are used as tools for spreading messages of Sheikh Salah and the IM. They are widespread, similar to other Islamic organizations. In a test carried out by this author, through the use of simple Facebook searches, ten Facebook pages were found in Arabic and English that presented the figure of Sheikh Salah. A similar amount of Facebook pages showed his deputy, Kamal Khatab. The messages of each of these Facebook pages was similar: They advance the struggle over Jerusalem, support the *al-Murābitoun* and *al Murābaḩāt*, warn about what a threat the Jews are—the ones who go up to the Temple Mount—due to their desire to destroy the al-Aqsa mosque, and build their temple there. These Facebook pages are a substitute for the internet sites and the magazines of the movement such as *Sawt al-Haq wa al-Hurriya* that were closed by an order from the authorities. It is reasonable to assume that these pages are maintained by the organization’s supporters and perhaps, in some of the instances, by Sheikh Salah and his deputy. No professional research of these Facebook pages has been made but it appears that there is great difficulty in following these profiles. Despite this, an analysis of the messages from the past two years shows that the activities of the NIM continue as usual and are as relevant as always despite the difficulties that the organization has had to face.

In the words of the organization, the Sheikh is seen as one who protects the mosque with his own body and who reveals the lies of the authorities in regard to Jewish intentions on the Temple Mount. The arrest is seen as harassment and not as payment for a crime. Because of this, the people identify with Sheikh Salah with

<sup>15</sup> Kamal al-Khatib's Facebook page, (20+) الشيخ كمال الخطيب. Facebook, retrieved on May 31, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Haifa Shalom Court, August 24, 2017. An indictment against Ra’ed Salah Mahajne. File PM"H 18/5580-17/3205.

cries of: “We are all Ra’ed Salah.” There is also a public campaign using Islamic organizations throughout Europe which has had an international impact putting diplomatic pressure on Israel in order to free Sheikh Ra’ed Salah from prison.<sup>17</sup> On February 10, 2020, Sheikh Ra’ed Salah was convicted and sentenced to 28 months in prison for supporting terrorist organizations and incitement. But even in court, Sheikh Salah continued to spread his ideological theories about the destructions of Israel.

The accused emphasized that the decision of the court was not against him personally but against the Muslim nation, the Arab world, and the Palestinian nation. “And every Muslim, Arab and Palestinian in the world will see that this decision is a sort of attack against the Quran, the Suna, the Arab language, popular folklore and on the Blessed al-Aqsa Mosque.” The accused added that injustice carried out by the justice system of any country at all, “accelerates their destruction by God and this is according to God’s law, about which it is said in the Holy Quran that ‘these villages, we destroyed them when they carried out injustice and we picked a time for their destruction ...’” And this is what causes them to be happy after the sentence was given. Later on they added that those who were rejoicing, due to the court decision: “It is better that they cry over this court decision because it speeds up their destruction by God.”<sup>18</sup>

The spreading of the Movement’s messages is not limited to Sheikh Salah. His wife, Camela Ahmed Mahajna, head of the *Muslimat min Ajal al-Aqsa* (Muslim women for al-Aqsa) organization helps him. Her organization was also declared illegal on Dec. 29, 2014. She writes:

Our purpose is to protect the al-Aqsa Mosque from any acts of violence, especially in light of the growing threats on this topic. At any moment we expect a cruel attack by the Jewish settlers on the al-Aqsa Mosque...therefore, we must increase awareness through teaching everything about the Blessed al-Aqsa Mosque. We are acting to encourage all women and the entire [Muslim] public to pray at the al-Aqsa Mosque and with the permission of Allah we will work to widen our activities so that it will include all of the uprooted villages, in other words those who are found on the lands that were captured in 1948. (Tal, 2015 p. 76)

One of the most significant events of the NIM took place in April 2016 in Nazareth where a new Nazareth party called al-Wāfa’ wa-al-Islāh was announced, one which was led by a member of the NIM. During Ramadan 2016, the movement continued to organize buses to Jerusalem. The NIM continues to function but in more innovative and quieter formats than those that existed before the NIM was outlawed (Nasasra, 2018, p. 76).

The NIM is popular and continues to be so. One professor who teaches at al-Quds University described the sheikh thusly:

Shaykh Ra’ id Salah is able to unite many Islamist streams, but the Israelis cannot tie him to Hamas or Iran. He is a danger from within. He represents the growing threat of [pre-19]48 Palestinians but he also highlights the failings of the PA to protect Islamic sites and defend Palestinian communities. He is helping to articulate Islamist sentiments on the ground in Jerusalem. (Larkin & Dumper, 2012, p. 41)

## Conclusions

Over the years, Sheikh Ra’ed Salah has gained influence over the Islamic minority inside Israel. He is one of the founders of the Islamic Movement in Israel which has been active since the latter part of the 1970s up until the present. He regularly preaches *jihad* activities against the State of Israel and the Jews who are within it.

<sup>17</sup> Ra’ed Salah’s Facebook page, إراند صلاح. <https://www.facebook.com/RaaidSalah>, retrieved on Oct. 20, 2020. He was eventually released from prison on Dec. 13, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Haifa Magistrate’s Court, Feb. 10, 2020. State of Israel vs. Ra’edMahajna. Verdict. File T”F 49376-08-17.

The Sheikh has adopted the rhetoric of the opposition which includes Hamas advertisements and religious symbolism in order to move the masses against the Israeli authorities, which he describes as “the occupation force” into the streets. According to Sheikh Salah, the occupation did not begin in 1967 but in 1948 and, in actuality, the entire State of Israel, according to his view, is occupied territory. That is the reason why he firmly objects to the Oslo Accords in opposition to the stand of the southern faction.

The outlawing of Sheikh Salah’s organization did not stop the activities of the organization in either Jerusalem or in Umm al Fahm. As seen from above, the organization continued to function on Facebook and other social media platforms sometimes even under its own name. The *da’wah* activities were continued as well as their fight for *al Aqsa*. NIM activities never stopped although some went underground. Although the steps taken against the organization extremely reduced the activities of the organization whose ideology comes directly from the Muslim Brotherhood which supports Hamas, but it did not hurt Sheikh Ra’ed Salah’s base of wide support. Putting the sheikh on trial for the opinions that he has expressed which exhibit a strong anti-Israel government stand passes on a message to the Arab society in Israel regarding what is permitted according to the right of expression, and what is prohibited in Israel. It appears that even after the court decision, the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement and Sheikh Ra’ed Salah will continue to be a symbol of Islamic resistance inside Israel.

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