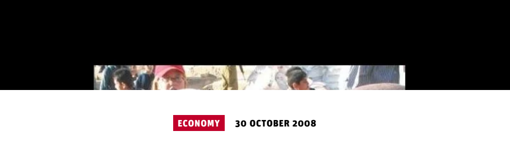

ECONOMY 30 OCTOBER 2008

Israel v Hamas

Schools in Hebron are being closed and other charitable organisations put under pressure by an Israe

BY EDWARD PLATT

The Israeli soldiers came to raid the sewing workshop in the middle of the night. Lorne Friesen, a 66-year-old Canadian man who used to be chaplain in a psychiatric hospital in Winkler, Manitoba, was one of two representatives of the Hebron branch of the Christian Peacemaker Teams who were staying in the building. The nightwatchman rang him at 1.30am and he and his colleague walked across the playground from their quarters in the girls' school to the orphanage, where 120 girls were sleeping in the dormitories on the third and fourth floors. By the time they arrived, the soldiers had entered the sewing workshop in the basement. There was nothing that Friesen could do to stop them emptying the building, but he deployed the weapon favoured by the so-called "internationals" who attempt to keep the peace in the West Bank city of Hebron: he took out a camera and began to film and photograph the operation.

The Israeli army claimed that ICS's charitable activities were only a front; its true aim was to "strengthen the terror organisation Hamas"

The raid, which took place on 30 April this year, was the latest stage in the Israeli army's campaign against an organisation called the Islamic Charitable Society of Hebron (ICS). It had begun on 26 February, when soldiers visited its premises and left military orders confiscating its assets and transferring ownership to the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). The news was greeted with shock and dismay in Hebron, where ICS is a significant presence. It runs two orphanages and three schools in Hebron, which provide for 1,940 children, 240 of whom are orphans. In October, it was planning to open a new girls' school, which had cost $2m to build. In the villages outside the city, it maintains other orphanages and kindergartens. In total, it employs 450 people. To support its charitable work, it runs a series of revenue-generating projects - a dairy, two bakeries, and a range of properties in Hebron including a warehouse that stores imported goods, a mall in the city centre and an apartment building with 30 flats.

Its income is supplemented by charitable donations. The practice of *zakat*, or charitable giving, is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, the five duties a Muslim must observe. Every Muslim is obliged to donate 2.5 per cent of his or her income each year, and ICS received donations from the same range of sources as most Islamic charities - local groups, wealthy individuals in the Palestinian diaspora or the Gulf States, and international charities, including several in Britain.

Yet the Israeli army claimed that ICS's charitable activities were only a front; its true aim was to "strengthen the terror organisation Hamas", and it accused ICS of being the "largest group in Hamas's network of charitable committees". ICS's schools and orphanages had educated generations of children in the spirit of jihad and instilled "the mentality of Hamas as a superior value". Major Oron Mincha, of the Israeli Central Command in Judea and Samaria - the biblical term that the IDF uses to describe the West Bank - maintains that most of the suicide bombers that have attacked Israel in the past 15 years have been sent by Hamas, and many of them have come from Hebron. Even its summer schools are considered breeding grounds for terrorists: "Some of the biggest terrorists in the West Bank in the past few years learned terrorism at summer schools organised by these charitable institutions," he says.

The Israelis placed the school governor under "administrative detention", which means he has been arrested without charge. In his absence, I spoke to an English teacher at ICS's boys' school in Hebron. Rasheed Rasheed denies that ICS is connected to Hamas in any way, and points out that it was founded in 1962, 25 years before Hamas was established. "Just because some employees there are Hamas-affiliated, it doesn't mean the whole society is Hamas," he told me, when I visited the girls' orphanage in August. "You can find Hamas members in Hebron Municipality, in Hebron University - everywhere: so why pick on this charity?"

Rasheed, at 37 years old, is a short, intense man, with close-cropped dark hair. He is plainly furious at the way his school has been treated. He denies that it teaches hatred or incites violence against Israel; he says they are doing a difficult job "in the most moderate way they can", and he adds that all 56 teachers at the schools signed a statement saying they were willing to undergo an investigation by a credible objective organisation. It was the summer holidays, and the classrooms and kitchens on the ground floor were empty, but he invited me to return in term time. "Come and see our curriculum," he said. "Come and see our classes. Question our students. What are we teaching them? My curriculum is made by Macmillan: is Macmillan a terrorist group?"

ICS's lawyer, Jawad Bulos, used all the measures available to him. First, he appealed against the closure notices to the civil administration of Judea and Samaria - the branch of the Israeli government which runs the occupied territories of the West Bank - but it dismissed the case. Then he took the case to the Israeli High Court, which set a hearing for 23 October, but rejected the request for a "prohibiting order", which would have prevented the army from carrying out its orders. The court has now postponed the hearing; the Israeli army notes that the court "does not see any special urgency in the matter" and concedes that the hearing might be delayed indefinitely. If it is ever heard, then Jawad Bulos has no doubt that it will uphold the army's actions. "I applied to the court because it's the only legal procedure I have, but I don't have the tiniest shred of hope that they will remedy the situation."

Earlier this year, on 5 March, the IDF raided the large warehouse ICS owned in the al-Harayeq district of the city. The army had cut a hole in the front door and removed its contents on to eight lorries. When I visited, the long stretches of shelving on the ground floor were bare when I visited, except for two packs of pink pencils – all that remained of an estimated $250,000 worth of clothing and stationery. Upstairs, there were shoes strewn across the floor, and odds and ends of clothing had been dumped inside a case made of cellophane wrapped around a metal frame – the one pallet that they hadn't been able to take.

Outside, the army had knocked down a wall of the warehouse next door. They had removed two industrial refrigerators and ransacked the workers' kitchens. The cupboard doors were standing open and the tins and packets inside had been opened and upended - the sink was full of beans and chickpeas and there were dark trails of ground spices winding across the floor. A rich, faintly rancid smell hung in the air.

"We went to that school for two years, and in that time I never heard anyone talk about Hamas or Fatah – you just went to school and you learnt"

On the same night the army raided the bakery and the new girls' school, which stands at the end of a deserted road, on the crest of the hill above the warehouses. It was finished, except for the playgrounds which needed surfacing, but the gates had been welded shut. "We told them that this school was paid for by Hamas and we won't let you open a Hamas school," says Oron Mincha. "We don't want them to study the Hamas way, because we don't want them to be terrorists. We want them to be regular people."

The raids were condemned within Israel - "the Israeli occupation has not been seen for a long time in such a ludicrous and inhumane light," said the columnist Gideon Levy - and attracted the attention of Hebron's resident "internationals". The city is the only place in the West Bank where Palestinans and settlers live side by side. The Hebron Protocol, which was signed in 1997 as part of the Oslo Accords, divided it in two. Israel ceded control of an area known as H1, which covers 80 per cent of the city and is home to 130,000 Palestinians, but it retained control of a smaller section designated H2, where as many as 600 settlers, guarded by a detachment of 3,000 soldiers, live among 20,000 Palestinians. Relations between the two are extremely tense, and during the past ten years many foreign organisations have taken up residence in Hebron - there is a quasi-official observers' mission, called the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, which is made up of volunteers from six participating countries, and three organisations which believe in non-violent direct action, including the Christian Peacemaker Teams.

CPT, which calls on Christians of all denominations to devote "the same discipline and self-sacrifice to non-violent peacemaking that armies devote to war", is based in H2, in the old city of Hebron. Its volunteers, who are often elderly or retired, patrol the streets in red caps, attempting to defuse confrontations between settlers, soldiers and Palestinians. In March, they turned their attention to the plight of Hebron's orphans. To begin with, they enlisted the help of Israeli human rights groups and foreign peace campaigners, such as the Irish Nobel peace laureate Mairead Corrigan-Maguire and the former US president Jimmy Carter, yet they found it harder to enlist the help of Palestinians. "Everyone was afraid that if they were seen as helping this organisation, they would be closed down or sent to prison," says Dianne Roe, a CPT peace campaigner who has been based in Hebron since 1995.

CPT members slept in the orphanages on the night of 31 March and 1 April, in the hope of deterring the threatened raid. Roe was impressed by what she saw: "All the children that we talked with were well cared for, they were bright - we went into the classrooms and it was obvious that this was a well-run institution. There was no evidence of any kind of hate material - just big signs in the cafeteria about giving thanks before a meal and after a meal."

During her visits to the orphanage, Roe also found the perfect figurehead for her attempts to publicise the story. Rabiha Abusnineh is a Texan-Palestinian girl who grew up in Houston and moved back to Hebron with her family in August 2006, when she was 15. Her father, Najaf, left Hebron 30 years ago and worked as a chemical engineer and in property. By his own account, he made a lot of money, and when he came back to Hebron two years ago, he built his "dream house" on the top of a hill overlooking the city centre.

It didn't take him long to choose a school for his two teenage daughters, Muna and Rabiha. The al-Shari'ya Secondary School for Girls had the highest academic standards in the city and the lowest student-teacher ratio. What's more, it was open - many of the state schools, which are administered by the PA, were closed because of a teachers' strike. "Implicitly, there was a religious reason, too," Najaf says. "We're Muslims and we tend to go to Islamic schools. But the main reason was that it's academically strong."

In Houston, Rabiha was treasurer of the student council and liked going to the mall with her friends. She found it difficult adapting to a different culture and learning a new language, but with her classmates' help, she managed it. "I hated my situation, but they helped me through it," she recalls. By the beginning of this year, she was top of her class, and she had begun to feel settled at school. She was horrified when she discovered that the Israeli authorities were planning to close it. "We went to that school for two years, and in that time I never heard anyone talk about Hamas or Fatah, nothing. You just went to school and you learnt. And because it's so much harder than in the United States, everyone just focused on learning. I never heard that our school had any association with Hamas."

She and her fellow students believed that ICS had fulfilled all its legal obligations: its accounts were open for inspection and all its funds were properly accounted for. "If they said that they were going to spend this amount of money on food or clothes for the orphans, that's what they did. Everyone thought that once they'd checked the records, they'd leave the school alone. But it shows that they're doing this for no reason - just so they can put 4,000 orphans on the street, with no homes, no food, nothing. That's the really inhumane part of it. There's really no solid reason."

A few days before the deadline of 1 April, Dianne Roe filmed Rabiha Abusnineh making a plea on behalf of her school. She sent the tape and an accompanying letter to the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. "I have been taught to stand up for what I believe in and what I believe has nothing to do with politics because I've always been neutral. But Oprah, by studying at this school and seeing everything that is provided, I cannot imagine what life is going to be like if it closes down, so I will stand by them to the very end until they get back their rights," she wrote, in the inimitably breathless style of the American teenager she used to be. Rabiha wanted to repay the kindness of the girls who had helped her when she arrived at the school, and she said she wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing that there are 4,000 orphans "who won't have anywhere to go, and won't have food to eat".

Had everything gone to plan, Rabiha would have become an international celebrity – the public face of the campaign to save the schools and orphanages. Unfortunately, her tape and letter were not picked up by the international media. The video was posted on YouTube, but four months later, it had been watched only 90 times.

The Israeli high court delayed the closure and confiscation orders for several days, but on 7 April, it granted the Israeli military an "indefinite delay" to provide full justification for its actions. On 10 April, two Israeli officers visited the sewing workshop, where the orphans and students of the girls' school produce women's clothing with the aim of learning a craft, and earning some extra income. A week later, it raided the second bakery, and destroyed the oven. It also evicted the tenants of al-Huda mall, which lies at the bottom of Ain Sara Street, close to the two green towers that dominate the centre of Hebron. Signs on the street frontage advertise the businesses that used to occupy the mall - a physiotherapist, a computer store and a bookshop or library - but the shops in the atrium beyond the entrance from the street are sealed and the floor is littered with discarded cardboard boxes.

The only units still occupied are the linked pair of shops that face the street, called Mama Care and Pretty Woman. The proprietor, who doesn't want to be named for fear of antagonising the Israelis, hired the same lawyer as ICS. Jawad Bulos presented documents proving the commercial contracts had been signed before 2000, when the Israelis first declared the organisation illegal. The day before the mall was due to close, she learnt that Jawad Bulos had secured their right to stay open.

By 1 April, almost all of the other occupants had left the building. The only one to remain was an English-trained cardiologist who runs a private clinic on the first floor. After seven years of building up his patient list and establishing his reputation, Dr Al Ashab didn't want to have to move and start again elsewhere. He knew he was committing an offence by remaining in the building, but he seemed prepared to rely on the fact that the Israeli soldiers have always visited the mall in the morning, while he only works there in the afternoon. He had no interest in the legal and political wranglings that had emptied the building and he had no idea whether his landlord is affiliated to Hamas or not. "I'm busy and I'm not interested in politics. And it's not my fault if they are. I just pay them the rent and they don't interfere with me. I would pay rent to the military authority if I had to."

On Wednesday 16 April, the IDF said that the sewing workshop would be closed within a fortnight. Lorne Friesen thought that they might not raid the workshop during term time, but the army was punctilious in observing its deadline – the soldiers arrived at the orphanage on the night it expired. When Friesen went outside the building, he discovered that they had closed off the street and were loading the contents of the sewing workshop on to three 40ft-long trailers parked outside among the jeeps and personnel carriers. As well as the racks of finished clothes, the bolts of cloth and the sewing machines, they took the phone and desk from the office and the paintings from the walls. They brought in grinders to cut up the long tables which were used for measuring cloth, and they carried the parts outside on a forklift truck that they had brought on one of the trailers.

During the course of the operation, Friesen looked up at the dormitories on the third and fourth floors and saw faces of the staff or children silhouetted in the windows. Given that some of the soldiers were wearing camouflage paint, he was surprised that they didn't object to him filming them at work, but most of the time, they ignored the two elderly Canadian men who were moving between them. He posted the video on YouTube and at one point it captures his colleague shouting at the soldiers. "So this is what you call fighting terrorism?" he says, as they pass bolts of cloth from hand to hand through the hall and the front door of the orphanage. "You guys are the ones who are terrorising people."

Friesen believes that the soldiers were so convinced that the organisation was affiliated with Hamas, and thus posed a threat to Israeli security, that they had no choice but to destroy it. Yet Friesen saw no evidence that they were right. During the time he spent at the schools and orphanages, he never saw any "hate material", and he said the conduct of the students was "admirable". He got the impression that ICS ran a "superior-quality service". "There is an atmosphere of deep devotion and dedication and the staff have a strong commitment to caring for the needy. The buildings were excellent quality and the grounds were neatly kept. So to have their property systematically and deliberately vandalised is deeply demoralising."

By the time the soldiers left the building, it was getting light. Soon afterwards, the first teachers arrived to assess the damage. The soldiers had confiscated $45,000 worth of goods; two days later the staff of ICS found out what they had done with them. "They had driven the trucks to the city dump and thrown everything into the garbage," says Friesen.

There was no evidence of hate material – just big signs in the cafeteria about giving thanks before a meal and after a meal

In the west, Hamas is regarded as a terrorist organisation, but to many Palestinians it has a very different image. Its origins lie in the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt in 1928, with the aim of establishing Islamic rule in all Muslim countries, and eventually uniting them in a single state, representing the *umma*, or Muslim nation. According to Khaled Hroub, author of *Hamas: a Beginner's Guide* and director of the Cambridge Arab Media Project, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1946 in Jerusalem. After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, it divided into two parts - one in the West Bank, which was under Jordanian control, and one in Gaza, which was governed by Egypt. After the Six Day War in 1967, when Israel gained control of all of historic Palestine, the two halves of the organisation began to merge.

At the time, Palestinian politics was dominated by the secular nationalism of Yasser Arafat's PLO, but during the Eighties, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood began to establish a foothold. When the first intifada broke out in 1987, its leaders in Gaza set up the Islamic Resistance Movement, otherwise known as Hamas; they were responding to pressure from within their organisation to confront Israel, and at the same time, they were hoping to direct and lead the uprising.

The new organisation shared the Muslim Brotherhood's aim of Islamicising Palestinian society, but it differed from its philosophy in one crucial respect: it reserved the right to commit violence. "The movement struggles against Israel because it is the aggressing, usurping and oppressing state that day and night hoists the rifle in the face of our sons and daughters," said Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, one of Hamas's founders, who was assassinated by an Israeli helicopter gunship in Gaza in 2004. Yassin, who was paraplegic and confined to a wheel-chair, was regarded as Hamas's spiritual leader, though the former Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, called him the "mastermind of Palestinian terror".

In the past eight years, according to the Israeli authorities, Hamas has killed 373 Israelis in the West Bank and Israel, including 48 members of the security forces. Yet at the same time as sending suicide bombers to attack Israeli civilians, it has continued the charitable work that forms the other part of its remit. It sponsors schools, medical centres and orphanages, and it has built up a reputation for fairness and incorruptibility. According to Hroub, the pattern is repeated across the Arab world – the "official" *zakat* institutions established by governments to collect and redistribute charitable money are generally regarded as corrupt, whereas the organisations run by Islamist movements, such as Hamas, are seen as "clean-handed and trustworthy".

Mincha says the IDF moved against charitable institutions such as ICS because it had found "a very tight connection between the charity movement and terror, and the connection is money". In fact, the connection is complicated, and far from clear. Hroub says that Hamas has two sorts of income - one for the movement, which includes its military wing, and one for its charities and social work that goes directly to the organisations without passing through Hamas channels. "Those organisations have public bank accounts and work transparently. Their affiliation to Hamas is moral, but not official. Hamas is happy with the distance between itself and those organisations, so they function without the threat of being closed," says Hroub. The claim that the charities fund Hamas's military activity is weak and unfounded, he adds: "It simply doesn't need to jeopardise the charities for things that it could do in a much simpler way."

Yet it is not the first time that Israel has attempted to shut down the network of Islamic charities that do so much to sustain life in the West Bank. They moved against the "*zakat* committees" in 1995, after the signing of the Oslo Accords which led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority. The campaign was derailed by the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000, but Hamas's unexpected victory in the legislative elections in the West Bank in January 2006 provided an opportunity to renew it. Although the elections were widely acknowledged to be free and fair, neither Israel nor the so-called Quartet on the Middle East - the United States, Russia, the EU and the United Nations - were prepared to recognise a Palestinian Authority run by what they regard as a terrorist organisation. Its first year in office was beset by problems: Fatah-affiliated militias, backed by Israel and the US, attempted to overthrow the government, and the internecine struggle erupted into violence in Gaza in June 2007. When "the Battle for Gaza" was over, the dividing lines in Palestinian society had been drawn: Hamas retained control of Gaza, and Fatah regained power in the West Bank. The campaign against Hamas, in all its forms, was soon renewed.

On 18 June 2007, the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, outlawed the executive and military wings of Hamas and, in August, the PA dissolved 103 charities and non-governmental organisations, on the grounds that they had "committed administrative, financial or legal violations". In October 2007, it decided to dismantle all the West Bank's charitable organisations. The PA said Hamas had been using the zakat committees as a means of transferring funds to its supporters in the West Bank, and said they had become financial empires, serving their own corrupt political ends. In December, the PA closed dozens of charities, and announced the creation of 11 new committees to replace them. Hamas called it a "declaration of war on the poor and needy".

On 17 December, an Israeli military court sentenced Husseini Awad, the former head of the Ramallah Charity Foundation, to three years in prison; it was the first time that anyone had been sentenced to jail for their involvement in "civilian support of the Hamas terror organisation". The verdict of the military court was reported in an IDF briefing. It said that Awad, a 62-year-old paediatrician, "stood at the head of an organisation that had many branches", and controlled a budget of millions of shekels a year. He "received money from Hamas financing overseas" and made monthly payments to 3,200 orphans and 15,000 impoverished families. "Any group that assists a terrorist organisation to recruit support . . . and carry out terrorist attacks is a dangerous group," said the judgment. "The fact that the committee recruits this support by means of assisting the needy does not negate the danger of these actions." It didn't matter that Awad had not "committed violence"; he did not "protest the way in which Hamas had used his organisation".

The closures soon spread to other cities in the West Bank. In July this year, the IDF raided and closed various institutions in Nablus, including a medical centre and Nablus Mall, which was said to be owned by a company with ties to the city's former mayor, Adli Yaish - a Mercedes dealer turned politician who has been in prison for a year. A week later, the army arrested Abdul Rahim Hanbali, the head of the largest *zakat* committee in the West Bank. Hanbali's organisation distributed $2m in alms in 2006 - a figure that fell to $1.2m in 2007, partly because of a drop in donations from American-Palestinians, who were concerned that they would be breaking anti-terrorism legislation by sending money. Neither Hanbali nor the Nablus *zakat* organisation appears on any public US government terrorist blacklist, but in the world after the attacks of 11 September 2001, the fact that it was a Muslim charity was enough to arouse concern.

In Hebron, the closures continued throughout the summer. In May, the Palestinian Authority froze the bank accounts of an orphanage in the village of Beit Ummar, outside Hebron, and the Israeli army arrested two of its employees. In June, ICS schools and kindergartens in two other villages outside Hebron were closed, and on 6 August, the Palestinian Authority sent 45 police officers armed with guns and teargas into the orphanage in Beit Ummar. When one employee asked to see a written order authorising the raid, soldiers beat him with an electric rod. Another volunteer told the Christian Peacemaker Teams that the forces conducted the raid "in a savage way": "Even the Israeli soldiers do not treat the employees like this."

The PA says that it is merely implementing the law, but its actions confirmed what many Palestinians already believe: that it is just another layer of the occupation. Rabiha's father, a well-built man who wears the hammer-loop jeans and faded work jackets of the classic American labourer, maintains that the Palestinians are wrong to regard the creation of the state of Israel as the *naqba* that blighted their future. He believes that the real catastrophe was the signing of the Oslo Accords that led to the creation of the PA. He doesn't have to look far for evidence of what he regards as its endemic corruption. His four-storey house has its own internal lift and windows modelled on a design from a French chateau, yet it is overshadowed by the vast concrete shell of a half-built basketball stadium that stands next door.

So far, the project has cost $17m of aid money provided by the French government, but Najaf Abusnineh says it will never be completed because it was built in the wrong place for a spectator venue, on a small plot on a hilltop, with no parking. To make matters worse, it overlooks a government compound that might attract gunfire in the event of fighting. "You cannot say that this is a government," says Najaf, scornfully. "They are a puppet government, a pawn in the hands of Olmert and George Bush, and whatever they do, isn't for the benefit of the Palestinian people - it's with the aim of making themselves rich and holding on to the chair."

Meanwhile the ICS's lawyer, Jawad Bulos, is placing his hopes on the negotiations he is conducting between the PA and the Israelis. "We have to find a way of addressing their fears - we have to find an acceptable solution that will save the association and put an end to the suffering of the people who need its services. Otherwise, it will be a disaster in Hebron."

Speaking for the Israelis, Major Mincha points out that they haven't closed any open schools in Hebron or elsewhere, and insists that they wouldn't close a school without ensuring there was adequate provision elsewhere. "I can assure you that there are enough classrooms and enough teachers in the West Bank for every single Palestinian child. Our civil command checks this sort of thing all the time: we make sure that all the children are studying."

Such arguments count for little in Hebron. The ICS schools opened at the beginning of the term on 24 August, but Rasheed Rasheed says they are not likely to survive for long. "I'm sure that the Israelis won't come near the schools and orphanages again, because they don't want to cause themselves headaches with the western media, but I can assure you that they will die automatically, due to a shortage of money." None of the teachers and other staff has been paid for six months, and Rasheed predicts that at least ten will leave in the next school year. He is planning to stay on for a year, but he has a wife and two daughters to support and eventually he will be forced to look for another job. He is tired of the political disputes that have brought his school to the brink of closure. "It's not Hamas or Israel that's going to pay the price - it's my students. What does a child have to do with Hamas or Fatah or Israel? He doesn't know anything yet. Why should a six-year-old boy pay for Hamas's agenda, or Fatah's agenda, or Israel's agenda?"

For the time being, the Palestinian Authority has appointed nine people to the board of ICS who are not affiliated to any party, but they have refused to take up the posts until they receive guarantees that they will not be arrested, and the organisation can

no longer access its own bank accounts or reach its funds. The army claims it is undermining Hamas's ability to raise funds, making it more difficult for the organisation to attack Israel, and yet it acknowledges that the group is far from beaten. In a briefing document released to the press, it says that Hamas is building "its forces in Judea, Samaria and the Jordan Valley in preparation for a potential takeover and to broaden its influence in Israel and throughout the region".

> He believes the real catastrophe was the signing of the Oslo Accords that led to
> the creation of the Palestinian Authority

There is a danger that the current campaign might backfire - each time Israel or the PA dismantles a charity committee and destroys a source of essential services that cannot be replicated, it increases dissatisfaction with Israel and its so-called "partner for peace". Rasheed Rasheed believes that the army's actions are the best advertisement that Hamas could hope for. "If Israel thinks they are destroying Hamas by doing things like this, then they are mistaken," he says. "If there is someone to be blamed for supporting Hamas, I blame Israel. What are they going to get out of this? More pain for the Palestinians - and then what? More hatred of Israel. The Palestinian children don't need a curriculum of incitement and hatred - the Israeli killings and shootings and checkpoints are their curriculum."

Edward Platt is the author of "Leadville" and a contributing writer of the New Statesman

hebron timeline

1962 Islamic Charitable Society of Hebron (ICS) formed with Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian authorisation

September 2006 A Birzeit University poll shows Muslim NGOs and charities provide 20 per cent of food and financial assistance to Palestine's poor

June/July 2006 The UN records four raids on ICS buildings by the Israel Defence Forces

17 July 2007 The Islamic Society for Orphan Sponsorship, a charity in Hebron not affiliated with the ICS, is raided and closed

18 June 2007 Mahmoud Abbas dissolves 103 charities and NGOs

26 February 2008 The Israeli army issues closure and confiscation notices against the ICS

5 March 2008 An ICS warehouse, bakery, and girls' school are raided

April 2008 Tenants of al-Huda mall evicted;

destruction of a second ICS bakery; and the Hebron girls' orphanage sewing workshop ransacked

8 May 2008 International human rights organisations endorse ICS

4 June 2008 Closure of ICS schools and kindergartens outside Hebron

July 2008: Closures and raids spread to other West Bank cities.

6 August 2008 The Palestinian Authority raids ICS orphanage in Beit Ummar

Research by Samira Shackle

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