

Surveying the wreckage of a neighbor's bungalow hit by a Palestinian rocket, retired Israeli official Avner Cohen traces the missile's trajectory back to an "enormous, stupid mistake" made 30 years ago.

"Hamas, to my great regret, is Israel's creation," says Mr. Cohen, a Tunisian-born Jew who worked in Gaza for more than two decades. Responsible for religious affairs in the region until 1994, Mr. Cohen watched the Islamist movement take shape, muscle aside secular Palestinian rivals and then morph into what is today Hamas, a militant group that is sworn to Israel's destruction.

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