

Hamas's Ideological Crisis

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Despite its success as the first Muslim Brotherhood organization to control and govern territory, and in part because of that success, Hamas today is under significant stress. In the West Bank, Hamas faces a severe security crackdown that has driven the movement underground. And in Gaza, Hamas has been forced to choose between engaging in acts of violence or attempting to effectively govern the territory it took over by force of arms. The result is an acute ideological tension within Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, which has been forced to suspend the resistance for which it is named and by which it defines itself. For some, the cessation of violence, however temporary, is a sign of moderation within Hamas. For others, Hamas's actions, including continued radicalization and weapons smuggling into Gaza, better denote the movement's true intentions and trajectory. To be sure, Hamas is not a monolithic movement. But the one constant among its various currents is its self-identification as a resistance movement.

Hamas under Stress

In the West Bank the ongoing Israeli military presence together with a renewed commitment by the Palestinian Authority under President Mahmoud Abbas has largely denied Hamas the ability to function effectively there. With new, U.S.-trained Palestinian battalions successfully bringing law and order to West Bank cities, places like Jenin – commonly referred to as the suicide bomber capitol of the West Bank just a few years ago – are now calm and enjoying significant improvement in economic prosperity.[1] Within the Ministry of Interior, a department overseeing charitable organizations is systematically removing Hamas members from the boards of charity committees and social service organizations; it is also registering each charity office and its board – something that was not done under the administrations of either Yasser Arafat or the short-lived Hamas-Fatah unity government in 2006.[2] Still, Israeli and Palestinian security officials concur that Hamas remains present and capable in the West Bank, operating largely underground in small cells, and would quickly rebuild itself were it not for the day-to-day security and intelligence activities of both Israeli and PA forces.[3]

For Hamas, however, the true crisis is not in the West Bank but in Gaza. Whereas Hamas is suppressed in the West Bank, it is in the Gaza Strip – where it is the de facto governing regime – where Hamas is under significant ideological stress. Ironically, the crisis is of its own making, the result of the uneasy merger of Hamas, a social, political and military “resistance” movement, with an Islamist government. As a government, Hamas has failed to provide for the needs of its purported constituents and remains an international pariah under economic siege. At the same time, its credentials as a “resistance” movement lose currency by the day as Hamas continues to refrain from attacking Israel for fear of reprisal attacks in the wake of Israel's Cast Lead operation in December 2008 and January 2009. Hamas failed to inflict significant Israeli casualties over the course of the Cast Lead battles, and instead of protecting its civilian population, the group hid its leaders and armaments within civilian structures such as mosques and hospitals.[4] Disenchanted with Hamas, Gaza residents reportedly rue having voted for its candidates in 2006.[5] Engaged in secular politics, failing to institute sharia law, and cracking down on fellow Palestinians who do attack Israel or threaten its rule, Hamas in Gaza has created a vacuum which salafi-jihadi groups – often populated

by disgruntled Hamas operatives and sometimes inspired by al Qaeda – have been keen to fill.[6]

Between Word and Deed

In the eyes of many journalists and academics, Hamas has moderated since taking the reins of governance in the Gaza Strip, despite the fact that it did so by force of arms.[7] Indeed, in recent interviews, Hamas leader Khaled Mishal has offered to cooperate with U.S. efforts to promote a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. He has indicated a willingness to implement an immediate and reciprocal ceasefire with Israel, and stated that the militant group would accept and respect a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.[8] Yet at other times, Mishal and other Hamas leaders expressly reject political compromise and insist that violence is the means by which the group will achieve its goals. Speaking in Damascus, for example, Mishal insisted, “We must say: Palestine from the sea to the river, from the west to the occupied east, and it must be liberated. As long as there is occupation, there will be resistance to the occupation.”[9] Violence, Mishal stressed, “is our strategic option to liberate our land and recover our rights.”[10]

The inconsistency in Hamas’s messaging is, at least in part, a result of its internally conflicted nature. Hamas the government sees the need for at least appearing moderate for political expedience in an effort to achieve near term political goals such as opening the border crossings into Gaza to trade. In particular, Hamas is eager to gain access to building materials and financing to rebuild infrastructure destroyed during last winter’s fighting. Every day Gaza’s shattered infrastructure remains unrepaired is another day Gaza residents are reminded of the cost they bear as a result of Hamas’s rocket attacks on Israeli towns and the Hamas leadership’s incapacity to do anything about it.

The sometimes conciliatory tone of Mishal’s public messaging is belied by the group’s continued violent actions and radicalization on the ground, as well as the rise to prominence of violent extremist leaders within the group’s local *shura* (consultative) councils. Indeed, Hamas’s activities of late appear to be diametrically opposed to the compliance of the more moderate public statements issued by Mishal, who has personally been tied to acts of terrorism and is himself a U.S.-designated terrorist.[11]

Despite talk of a ceasefire and pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hamas’s military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, continues to engage in terrorist activities. Shooting attacks are still common along the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip, including the firing of rocket-propelled grenades and mortar shells. In late July, two Qassam Brigades operatives were killed in a “work accident” while placing explosives along the border fence near the al-Buraij refugee camp in central Gaza.[12] A few days later, Israeli defense officials revealed that Hamas has been digging tunnels -- often used by the group to smuggle weapons and conduct kidnapping operations -- next to UN facilities, including one near a UN school in Bait Hanun that had recently collapsed. The placement of the tunnels near UN facilities was purportedly intended as a preventive measure against an Israeli attempt to destroy the tunnels.[13] In September 2009, a Hamas operative was killed, along with a militant from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), as he was planting a bomb along the Gaza border fence.[14]

Meanwhile, over the past several months, Palestinian security forces in the West Bank have seized at least \$8.5 million in cash from arrested Hamas members who plotted to kill Fatah-affiliated government officials. Palestinian officials reported that some of the accused had “recently purchased homes adjacent to government and military installations, mainly in the city of Nablus” for the purpose of observing the movements of government and security officials. PA officers also seized uniforms of several Palestinian security forces from the accused Hamas members.[15]

In April 2009, Palestinian forces raided a weapons workshop in the basement of a mosque in Qalqilya as part of an increased PA counterterrorism campaign. The forces discovered the workshop

following a series of explosions heard at the mosque earlier that month. Eighty kilograms of explosives were found, including pipe bombs and a seven-kilogram IED. The officials arrested seven people, believing them to be connected to the arms laboratory. Although Hamas has denied any connection to the weapons workshop, many residents of Qalqilya have condemned the group in response, since Hamas is known for caching weapons in mosques, such as in Judea and Samaria.[16] Hamas control of the Gaza-Egyptian border, combined with the ineffectiveness of Egyptian border security forces, opened the frontier to extensive smuggling activity. As a result, Hamas accelerated its military buildup, enabling the terrorist organization to better equip its troops with weapons and ammunition. Beyond small arms, Israeli intelligence estimates that some 250 tons of explosives, 80 tons of fertilizer, 4000 rocket-propelled grenades, and 1800 rockets were transported from Egypt to Gaza from September 2005 to December 2008. According to Israeli figures, from June 2007 to December 2008, Hamas increased not only the quantity but also the quality of its arsenal in Gaza, improving the performance of its improvised explosive devices and expanding the distance and payload capabilities of its Qassam rocket warheads.[17] In late August 2009, Egyptian police discovered two tons of explosives hidden on the Egyptian side of the border ready to be smuggled into Gaza. A few days earlier, Egyptian police thwarted an attempt to smuggle 1,100 pounds of explosives into Gaza.[18]

Most small-range rockets fired from Gaza prior to and during the recent conflict were locally produced. However, over the past year, Hamas has acquired a formidable collection of imported 122 mm rockets -- longer-range rockets known as Grads -- brought in piecemeal through tunnels and reassembled in Gaza. These Grads, an Iranian-produced version of the Chinese-designed rocket, increase the reach of Hamas into Israel, making them a sought-after commodity and well worth the effort and expense of smuggling them all the way from Iran.[19] According to Israeli officials, Hamas has successfully smuggled into Gaza anti-tank missiles capable of penetrating the Israeli Merkava tank and man-portable, shoulder-fired missiles like the SA18 (Igla) and SA7 (Strella) varieties.[20]

Israeli officials have described the Hamas policy as “industrial quiet,” which includes a pause in violence for the practical purpose of rearming, and for the strategic aim of consolidating its control in Gaza.[21] According to an Israeli report, Hamas is engaged in its most significant arms buildup to date, including some 80 tons of explosives, roadside bombs, and longer range rockets capable of targeting Israeli communities deeper in Israel.[22] Hamas stockpiles most of its weapons in the Gaza Strip, but maintains weapons caches in the West Bank as well, such as the stockpile of 200 kilograms of fertilizer and gunpowder seized in Qalqilya in April 2008.[23]

And while rebuilding its own arsenal, Hamas claims to be coordinating jihadist activity targeting Israel with “all the factions of the resistance.” In October 2009, the Minister of Interior of the *de facto* Hamas government in Gaza, Fathi Hamad, told a conference, “We routinely meet with the commanders of the [resistance] factions to remove obstacles between us. We have ended the security coordination with the occupation [i.e., the Palestinian Authority’s security coordination with Israel] and have replaced it with jihadist coordination”[24]

Radicalizing Palestinian Society

For Hamas, mutating the predominantly ethno-political Palestinian national struggle into a fundamentally religious conflict is critical to the group's ideology and its continued ability to inspire Palestinians to reject compromise or peaceful solutions to the conflict. Recently, Hamas embarked on a large public relations campaign, using culture and the arts to glorify violence and demonize Israel. In a telling example, Hamas produced a feature-length film in 2009 that celebrated the life of Emad Akel, a leading Hamas terrorist who was killed by Israeli troops in 1993. Written by hardline Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar, *Emad Akel* was first screened in July 2009 at the Islamic University

in Gaza City and described by Hamas interior minister in Gaza Fathi Hamad as the first production of "Hamaswood instead of Hollywood." [25]

Hamas's Al Aqsa Television produced a children's show featuring a Mickey Mouse look alike named Farfur who praised "martyrs" and preached Islamic domination. After being roundly condemned, including being described as "pure evil" by Walt Disney's daughter, [26] Hamas ran one final skit in which Farfour refused to sell his land to an Israeli, who then murdered the Palestinian mouse. The young Palestinian girl presenting the skit commented, "Farfur was martyred while defending his land." He was killed "by the killers of children." [27] Farfour was quickly replaced with a new character, Nahoul the Bee: "I want to continue in the path of Farfour, the path of Islam, of heroism, of martyrdom and of the mujahedeen. ... We will take revenge of the enemies of Allah." [28] Most recently, the program introduced Nassur, a stuffed bear who called for "slaughter" of Jews "so they will be expelled from our land." [29]

Despite Mishal's moderate statements, Hamas's continues its campaign of radicalization targeting Palestinian youth. During summer 2009, more than 120,000 Palestinian children attended Hamas-run summer camps that focused not only on Islamic teachings, but also on "semi-military training with toy guns." Hamas campers recently staged a play reenacting the Gilad Shalit abduction before an audience that included Hamas officials such as Usama Mazini and Sheikh Ahmad Bahar. For Hamas leaders like Bahar, this is business as usual. In July 2003, a Hamas camp run by Bahar, the al-Aqsa Intifada Martyrs Summer Camp, conducted classes in radical Islam that exposed campers to images of suicide bombers plastered on the camp's walls. As explained by Bahar, teaching children the history of Islam while surrounding them with pictures of martyrs instills "seeds of hate against Israel."

Exposing Palestinian children to such radical messages at a young age has been a tactic employed not only in recreational institutions but also in schools. In 2001, the Islamic Society (al-Jamiyah al-Islamiyah) in Gaza held a graduation ceremony for the 1,650 children who attended its forty-one kindergartens. Photographs of the ceremony show young, uniformly dressed children carrying mock rifles. In the photos, a five-year-old girl dips her hands in red paint to mimic the bloodied hands Palestinians proudly displayed after the lynching of two Israelis in Ramallah. Another child, dressed as Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, is surrounded by other children costumed as suicide bombers. Hamas does not keep its reason for these ceremonies a secret. After his capture, Hamas activist Ibrahim Abd al-Fatah Shubaka told Israeli authorities that the Islamic Charitable Association in Hebron maintains two orphanages and schools that "instill the pupils with Hamas values, and their graduates include operational Hamas activists."

Divisions within Hamas

Despite its myopic focus on promoting violent conflict over peaceful negotiations with Israel, Hamas is by no means a monolithic movement. Divisions within the Hamas leadership were evident, for example, as the six month term of the recent cease-fire came to a close and varying Hamas leaders issued conflicting statements terminating the ceasefire or calling for its extension.

To be sure, untangling the fissures within Hamas is of critical importance to anyone seeking to understand its decision making process.

Hamas is composed of three interrelated wings. The social welfare and political wings are the public faces of the group's social, administrative, political, and propaganda activities. The military wing is principally engaged in covert activities such as executing suspected collaborators, surveilling potential targets, procuring weapons, and carrying out guerilla and terrorist attacks. Overseeing all Hamas activities is a *Majlis al-Shura*, or consultative council, which is the group's overarching political and decision-making body in Damascus. It includes representatives from Hamas elements in Gaza, the West Bank, Israeli prisons and the external leadership based in Damascus. Under this

Shura are committees responsible for supervising a wide array of activities, from media relations to military operations. At the grassroots level in the West Bank and Gaza sit corresponding local Hamas Shura committees that answer to the high-level Shura council and its committees and carry out the decisions on the ground.

There are multiple fault lines within Hamas. The external leadership is divided into two main groups, one of Gazans led by second-in-command Mousa Abu Marzook, and one composed mostly of Hamas members from the West Bank who have studied or worked in Kuwait. The so-called *Kuwaidia*, or Kuwaiti group, is led by Hamas leader Khaled Mishal. The two factions work closely together, but there is some resentment of the Kuwaiti group by Marzook's faction, because Mishal's *Kuwaidia* tend to dominate key positions within the Hamas political bureau.

Others include tensions between the group's internal leadership on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza and its external leadership in Damascus, between leaders in the West Bank and Gaza, and between religious Palestinian nationalists and radical Islamists.

These fissures were exacerbated by the assassinations of Sheikh Yassin and Abdelaziz al-Rantissi in 2004, which left a gaping hole in the Hamas leadership structure on the ground in the Gaza Strip. While Mahmoud Zahar and Ismail Haniyeh assumed leadership of the movement's overt political wing, several protégés of Rantissi's more militant school aligned themselves with Mohammad Deif, the head of the Qassam Brigades in Gaza. For example, Shaykh Nizar Riyan – who was killed in an Israeli airstrike in January, 2009 – openly challenged the public statements of Haniyeh and others at the time, claiming Hamas would cease firing mortars at Israel from Gaza. The pledge came in response to complaints from local Palestinian businessmen frustrated by the damage Israeli reprisal attacks against Qassam manufacturing and launching sites did to their businesses and the local economy. In response, Riyan publicly paraded through the streets of the Jabalya refugee camp carrying weapons. A prominent Rantissi protégé, Riyan then held a press conference at his mosque where four masked Qassam Brigade militants dismissed Haniyeh's remarks, displayed a variety of weapons, handed out pamphlets documenting Hamas attacks, and announced that Qassam rockets capable of reaching the Israeli city of Ashkelon were under development.

The most significant fault line within Hamas is between those Palestinian Islamists for whom the Palestinian national cause comes first and those for whom Islamist ideology takes precedence.

And while many supposed moderates still support terror attacks under certain conditions, there has been at times a current within the Hamas movement calling for a cessation of military activity and a focus on Islamist political and social activity along the lines of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. According to one Israeli expert, an internal memorandum proposing Hamas give up its "secret underground apparatus" was circulated around the Gaza Strip in October 2004 by a senior Hamas leader there. While many Hamas leaders in the West Bank reportedly supported the idea, it was shouted down by Gaza's Hamas leaders and by the senior political leadership outside the Palestinian territories.

Rise of the Hardliners in Gaza

Given the fissures and divisions within Hamas, the rise of Hamas hardliners in Gaza is particularly telling of the group's overall trajectory. This year, Hamas's local Shura councils held elections to determine who would move into leadership positions. Three local councils under the aegis of the Majlis al-Shura, the group's overarching political and decision-making body in Damascus, represent Gaza, the West Bank, and Hamas members in Israeli prisons. This last council completed a five-month-long election process in July 2009 that resulted in the appointment of Yahya al-Sinwar as president of the Shura council. Sinwar is described as the founder of a Hamas security agency and he is serving a life sentence. Many other Hamas operatives involved in terrorist activities were placed as council members, including:

- Abbas al-Sayyed, the mastermind of the March 2002 Park Hotel suicide bombing that killed 29 people and left 155 seriously wounded. In Tulkarm, he was both an overt Hamas political leader and the covert leader of the Qassam Brigades terrorist cell.
- Salah al-Arouri, a founder of the Qassam Brigades in the West Bank, who served as both a recruiter and a commander for Hamas terrorist cells. Arouri received thousands of dollars for weapons procurement from Hamas operatives in the United States, such as key financier Mohammed Salah, and provided additional thousands to Hamas terrorists for weapons to conduct attacks.
- Abd-al-Khaliq al-Natsheh, Hamas's spokesman in Hebron, where he reportedly was the interlocutor between Hamas members who wanted to carry out suicide attacks and the leaders of Hamas terror cells within the Qassam Brigades. He was also responsible for an extensive terrorist infrastructure in Hebron which planned and executed many attacks in Israel, including the April 2002 Adora attack and the June 2002 Karmey attack.

Other Hamas terrorist wing operatives elected to political positions reportedly include Sheikh Jamal Abu-al-Hayja, a commander in the Janin Camp battle; Jihad Yaghmur, a man responsible for Israeli soldier Nachshon Faxman's abduction in 1994; and Muhammad Jamal al-Natsheh, a deputy in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). [30]

This more radical element in Gaza reportedly followed instructions only from outside leaders like Mishal and Imad al-Alami until Zahar and other hardline leaders took on a more prominent role. With its electoral victory in January 2006, and even more so after it defeated Fatah forces and took over the Gaza Strip by force in June 2007, the Damascus leadership lost some control to Hamas leaders in Gaza. While the Damascus leadership remained dominant, in large part because it still controlled the organization's purse strings and oversaw relationships with groups like Hezbollah and countries like Iran, Hamas leaders on the ground in Gaza were making day to day decisions on Hamas rule there. Hardline leaders like Zahar and Said Siam lost their cabinet posts when Fatah and Hamas formed a short-lived national unity government in March 2007, but their influence only grew since they maintained control over the movement's Executive Force and Qassam Brigades and were unburdened by the responsibility of governance.

These elections are a clear continuation of Hamas's efforts to bring terrorist leaders to the foreground. In the August 2008 elections for Gaza's Shura council, for example, Hamas hardliners dominated as well.[31] Relative moderate Hamas leaders like Ghazi Hamad and Ahmad Yusuf reportedly did not even bother to run, seeing that the slate was dominated by young Hamas members affiliated with the Qassam Brigades. The elections brought hard-line Hamas military officials into the movement's Gaza political bureau. This group rejects "national dialogue" negotiations with Fatah, which it sees as a means of removing Hamas from power and/or forcing it to compromise on its ideological commitment to confronting Israel through violence and rejecting a negotiated two-state solution. Within this political dynamic, solidified by the August Shura council vote, de facto Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh is not believed to hold significant sway.

Ironically, the splits within Hamas now appear to divide even the hardliners themselves. PA authorities in the West Bank reportedly seized internal Hamas correspondence in November 2008, in which the Damascus-based Hamas leadership takes the group's leaders in Gaza to task for undermining the Egyptian-mediated dialogue with Fatah. The letter suggests Hamas leaders abroad and in the West Bank were trying to rein in the movement's leaders in Gaza, who were seen as dictating inflexible positions and dominating the movement's agenda.[32]

The Salafi-Jihadi Challenge

In some ways, Hamas's war of words with al Qaeda is even more telling than its periodic crackdown on Salafi-Jihadi elements in the Gaza Strip. It is not surprising that Hamas will not tolerate challenges to its supremacy in Gaza, such as Jund Ansar Allah's declaration of an Islamic emirate

there in August 2009. But the public spat between Hamas and al Qaeda that played out over the Internet following the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2006 was unexpected.

After all, while Hamas is not part of al Qaeda's global jihadist movement or even an affiliated regional franchise, it is a "glocal" Islamist group committed to fighting a global jihad in defense of the umma by engaging the enemy in its local corner of the world. In the wake of its 2006 military conquest of the Gaza Strip, Hamas won the admiration and respect of al-Qaeda operatives and global jihadis. Likewise, sharing a baseline ideological commitment to jihadism, former Hamas members, especially from its military branch, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, have joined several of the al-Qaeda-inspired organizations in the Gaza Strip.

The quarrel between Hamas and al-Qaeda revolves around the former's decision to participate in a secular political process and not to implement or enforce strict adherence to sharia law in Gaza when it took over the territory. As a Salafi group, al-Qaeda wholly rejects political engagement.

Hamas's involvement in the Palestinian electoral process in the first instance, and then in a diplomatic process with Fatah and Egypt, conflict with al-Qaeda's Salafi-influenced and strictly militant course of action to restore the Islamic Caliphate.

Following major gains by Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in command, called on his "brothers in Hamas to fight on and not to accept agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel." [33] Hamas, however, continued to couple its militant attacks with politics and intra-Palestinian negotiations, prompting al-Qaeda to launch a public dialogue decrying Hamas's actions.

On December 20, 2006, following calls for a national referendum unifying the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, Zawahiri publicly rebuked Hamas for participating in the January 2006 elections. He chided, "How come they did not demand an Islamic constitution for Palestine before entering any elections? Are they not an Islamic movement?" [34] After Hamas became a signatory to the Mecca Accord in early 2007, Zawahiri continued to criticize the movement, stating that Hamas had surrendered to "the U.S. Satan and his Saudi agent." [35] In April, al-Qaeda figure Abu Yahya al-Libi appealed to Hamas's military wing, stating that "They [Hamas] betrayed the dreams of their young fighters and they stabbed them in the back." [36] Al-Qaeda has publicly suggested that Hamas should abandon its government role and "choose jihad and resistance," rather than "abandoning Palestine." [37] In the words of the Kuwaiti cleric Hamid al-Ali, who was designated as an al-Qaeda terrorist by the United Nations and the U.S. Treasury, [38] Hamas's conflicting post-election needs to maintain its rule while "preserving the noble values of its martyrs" left the movement in an untenable position, much like a "sheep besieged by wild animals that want to suck her blood." [39]

Following Hamas's violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2006, however, al-Qaeda changed its tone, congratulating Hamas on its military victory over the secular Fatah. "Today we must support the mujahidin in Palestine, including the Hamas mujahidin," Zawahiri stated, even as he challenged the Hamas leadership, to "redress your political path." [40] That did not happen, and prompted al-Qaeda to take advantage of the opportunity to try to lure Hamas operatives away from the movement's nationalist focus to the cause of global jihad. In February 2008, the elusive Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, head of al-Qaeda in Iraq, denounced Hamas's leadership for betraying Islam and called on Hamas's military wing to break off from the group and join the global jihadist movement. [41]

That has not happened, although several salafi-jihadi groups have sprung up in Gaza and all include within their ranks disaffected former Hamas members. Tensions came to a head in mid-August 2009, when Hamas security forces raided a mosque affiliated with a salafi-jihadi preacher who denounced Hamas and declared the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Gaza.

A gunfight ensued with the group Jund Ansar Allah, in which some 24 people were killed and 130 wounded. Among the dead was Fuad Banat, a Hamas operative sent from Syria by the group's leadership in Damascus to improve training of Hamas operatives in Gaza. Banat soon split with

Hamis over the group's commitment to a ceasefire with Israel and served as Jund Ansar Allah's military commander alongside Abdelatif Musa, who served as the group's spiritual leader.[42] Al-Qaeda in Iraq denounced the Hamas attack on its website, calling on Allah "to avenge the blood of the murdered men and to destroy the Hamas state." [43] The episode highlights both the presence in Gaza of salafi-jihadi groups inspired by but not (yet) formally affiliated with al-Qaeda, and the tensions between these groups and Hamas, a violent Islamist but still Palestinian nationalist group now in power in Gaza.

The ironies are telling. Hamas opposes the salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza, sometimes violently. But its proactive campaign to radicalize Palestinian society and to transform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from an ethno-nationalist conflict over land into a religious battle over theology fosters an environment conducive to salafi-jihadi ideology, promoting global jihad in defense of the Muslim nation (*umma*). As the responsible authority in government, Hamas has at times tried to rein in militant groups planning to conduct attacks or fire rockets at Israel – despite its continued support for such actions – and has incurred the wrath of salafi-jihadi groups in return. For such groups, Hamas's participation in local elections, and temporary ceasefires with Israel, are anathema and a violation of the requirement to wage violent jihad. Not surprisingly, some of the groups are in large part comprised of former Hamas members disillusioned by Hamas's failure to vigorously enforce Islamic law (sharia) in the Gaza Strip, and to use the area as a launching pad for attacks on Israel.

Recognizing the damage such challenges pose to Hamas's own jihadist credentials, in September 2009 the movement's terrorist wing posted on its website a paper on "The Concept of Jihad as the Islamic World Understand" [sic] in which it highlighted the work of Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, famous for his religious edicts (fatwa) justifying suicide bombings targeting civilians in Israel and supporting the insurgency in Iraq.[44] Qaradawi, the paper stresses, "is extremely careful to distinguish between extremist groups that declare war on the whole world, killing indiscriminately, tainting the image of Islam and providing its enemies with fatal weapons to use against it, on the one hand, and on the other groups resisting occupation." [45]

And yet, for some in the salafi-jihadi community, Hamas's jihadist credentials still make the movement a legitimate partner of the global jihadist movement. In June 2009, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, the al-Qaeda commander in Afghanistan also known as Sheikh Said, stated that both al-Qaeda and Hamas "share the same ideology and the same doctrine." [46] But in a sign that Hamas remains a hotly debated issue among salafi-jihadi ideologues, Islamist theoretician Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi quickly disputed this claim, asserting that the salafi-jihadis and "Hamas share neither ideology nor doctrine." [47]

The Movement at a Crossroads

In October 2009, Hamas leaders rejected the latest Egyptian-mediated proposals for intra-Palestinian reconciliation. The reason, according to the statement issued by the Damascus-based leadership, was that "the wording submitted by Cairo to the factions makes no reference to the struggle (with Israel) and the aggression against our people." [48] Such intransigent positions should not surprise, even coming on the heels of what some described as the moderating of a Hamas co-opted by the everyday needs of governance. Consider, for example, that in the days following its sweeping electoral victory in 2006 parliamentary elections, Hamas leaders did not soften their rhetoric. Instead of allowing participation in the political process to co-opt them into moderation, Hamas leaders underlined their intention to continue attacking Israel and to make Palestinian society more Islamic.

Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar insisted the group's Qassam Brigades "will remain, they will grow, they will be armed more and more until the complete liberation of all Palestine." Under Hamas, Zahar predicted, the new Palestinian government would promote "martyr tourism" to draw tourists interested in the history of armed Palestinian resistance, and the Ministry of Culture would produce

literature about jihad. If elected, a Hamas candidate from Rafah promised, Hamas would enact legislation consistent with Islamic sharia (religious law). “We would present to the umma [Muslim Nation] and the Palestinian people the laws and legislation compatible with the Islamic sharia and would do our best to nullify the non-Islamic ones.” This would come hand in hand, the candidate promised, with enhanced social services courtesy of the Hamas *dawa*.”[49]

These predictions are now coming to fruition, though Hamas has from time to time softened its public message in an effort to facilitate Egyptian-moderated talks with Fatah, and in the hope of easing the international isolation of their regime in Gaza. Hamas's tactical flexibility, however, should not be mistaken for strategic change. Even in recent interviews, Mishal has been clear that Hamas has not rejected terrorism, but has put it on hold due to current circumstances. "Not targeting civilians," Mishal explained, "is part of an evaluation of the movement to serve the people's interests. Firing these rockets is a method and not the goal." [50] In the context of discussing the sharp drop in Hamas rockets fired at Israeli civilian population centers, Mishal added, "The right to resist the occupation is a legitimate right, but practicing this right is decided by the leadership within the movement." [51]

Even as Hamas advances its public-relations blitz for tactical gains, the group continues to advance its strategic goals through ongoing terrorist activities, robust radicalization, weapons smuggling, and the election of militant hardliners to leadership positions. Against the backdrop of such activity, it is difficult to describe Hamas as moderating its positions based on public comments intended for Western consumption alone.

Discussion of moderates and radicals almost invariably invites well-meaning efforts to engage with the former to further splits with the latter. In the case of Hamas, this will only be counterproductive – on issues relevant to U.S. policy, there are no substantive divisions between the two groups, only tactical differences. And given the importance of strengthening the anti-Hamas Palestinian Authority, any effort to engage with even part of Hamas will be sure to erode confidence within the PA, further diminishing long-term prospects for real diplomatic progress.

The policy readjustment must come not from the West but from Hamas, if it is indeed capable of such a readjustment.

Were Hamas to couple its moderate talk with a disavowal of violence in word and deed, that would be something. Though unlikely, such moderation would likely fracture the group into factions divided between those who see “resistance” as the group’s primary calling no matter the cost, and those focused more on the building of an Islamist state in Gaza today for the purpose of resisting the enemy tomorrow. As a corollary, more Hamas hardliners would leave Hamas and join al Qaeda-inspired salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza that remain ideologically committed to violence in the name of religion. What is more likely is that Hamas will revert back to terrorism and political violence targeting Israel. With its ongoing radicalization and weapons smuggling programs, Hamas is well suited to do so at any time. In the meantime, promises of moderation that coincide with continued violence, weapons smuggling, and radicalization are, as they say in the region, *kalam fadhi* (empty words).

[1] Lt. General Keith Dayton, “Peace through Security: America's Role in the Development of the Palestinian Authority Security Services,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy Soref Symposium, May 7, 2009; see also Jim Zanotti, “U.S. Security Assistance to the Palestinian Authority,” Congressional Research Service, June 24, 2009.

[2] Author interview, PA Ministry of Interior, September 2008 and September 2009, Ramallah

[3] Author interviews with Israeli and Palestinian security officials, Tel Aviv and Ramallah, respectively, September 2009.

- [4] See Yoram Cohen and Jeff White, *Hamas in Combat: The Military Performance of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement*, Policy Focus #97 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2009).
- [5] Howard Schneider, "What to Do with Hamas? Question Snarls Peace Bid," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2009
- [6] For a complete discussion of salafi-jihadi groups in the Palestinian territories see Yoram Cohen and Matthew Levitt, with Becca Wasser, *Al Qaeda Inspired Groups in Palestine: Determined but In Check* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, forthcoming 2009)
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