

 A Conflicts Forum Monograph

Hamas and al-Qaida

**The Prospects for Radicalization in the
Palestinian Occupied Territories**

By Khalid Amayreh

October, 2007

Conflicts Forum: Beirut - London - Washington

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Précis: The rise of the Islamic Resistance Movement -- Hamas -- in the Palestinian Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza provided a challenge for Israel and the West. Israel, the United States and the European Union have responded to this challenge by failing to differentiate Hamas from other and more radical Islamist movements and networks. That policy, which includes economic and political sanctions, now threatens to radicalize Palestinian society, pushing supporters of Hamas into the arms of al-Qaida and other salafist organizations. What are the prospects that -- should the Hamas political program fail as a result of these sanctions -- the Palestinian population will turn to more radical Islamist groups?

Introduction

Since the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, there has been a strong tendency in most dominant western political circles, as well as in large parts of the Western media, to paint all Islamist movements as a part of the same political spectrum -- to describe Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda using the same terms. The most pertinent and most recent example has to do with Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement. Israel, as well as its most powerful allies and supporters in the West, have made strenuous and continuing efforts to portray Hamas and al-Qaida as indistinguishable political groups, thereby virtually ignoring the fundamental differences between the movements.

These efforts have yielded significant successes particularly in North America, where the general political environment (as well as the official positions of the major American and Canadian political parties) is traditionally pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian. Even so, Europe does not lag far behind the United States in promoting this viewpoint. Following the lead of the United States, the European Union -- the E.U. -- eventually moved to classify Hamas as a terrorist organization and, following the civil troubles in Gaza in June of 2007, the E.U. followed the American policy in clamping an economic embargo on the Palestinians of Gaza in an attempt to sever their loyalties from Hamas's Gaza leadership. While that effort has largely failed, large segments of the West, including the vast proportion of the Western media, regularly conflate Hamas with "fundamentalist Jihadist Islam" -- with al-Qaida.

In the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as throughout almost all of the Middle East, it is generally understood that Israel's ultimate goal in demonizing Hamas -- in identifying it as an organization that is indistinguishable from al-Qaida -- is to foster the public impression that the Palestinian problem is first and foremost a terrorist problem. The Israeli government, and particularly those very conservative parties that form the right wing of the current Olmert coalition, have been particularly intent on convincing the world that the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands is not done through choice, but through necessity -- as an essential part of Israel's Western-oriented "war on terrorism." In fact, the leaders of these rightwing parties now regularly claim that the Palestinian problem has little or nothing to do with a genuine struggle by an oppressed people for freedom and independence from a foreign military occupation. The impression that is left is that if it weren't for terrorism, the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories would end tomorrow.

Israel's political leaders calculate that vilifying Hamas by associating it with al-Qaida will make the West succumb to the Israeli view point -- namely that priority with regard to Palestine should be given to defeating terror, not ending the occupation. The idea, rather simple and straightforward, is that if you wish to defeat your enemy, you make your enemy as hated as possible. Identifying Hamas with al-Qaida, probably the most hated political-ideological group in the world today, makes that possible -- and makes the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories defensible. So it is that the centerpiece of Israel's occupation -- that it is "fighting terrorism" -- has gained wide acceptance in neoconservative circles in the United States and large parts of Europe, especially among Israel's most ardent supporters.

However, Palestinians as well as many Arabs and Muslims contend that the Islamic Resistance Movement and al-Qaida are actually two quite different organizations, and failing to differentiate them is a distortion of reality. Indeed, the often acrimonious discussions involving supporters of the two organizations, especially on Arabic websites, testify to the fundamental differences between them. This paper will detail the differences between the two movements, pointing out their fundamental differences, their ideological and political divergences, and then propose a means of carrying forward a program that will lead to their differentiation. The monograph presented here is the result of detailed research into the roots of the two movements, as well as on-the-ground discussions with their supporters.

Hamas vs. al-Qaida

There are numerous fundamental ideological and political differences between Hamas and al-Qaida, which the typical western reader knows very little about. Ideologically, Hamas has adopted and promotes the relatively moderate school of thought espoused by Harakat al- Ikhwan al Muslimun -- the Muslim Brotherhood -- which advocates peaceful means, not violence, in effecting change in Islamic societies.¹ In contrast, Al-Qaida adopts a school of thought called “Madrasat al Fikr al Salafi al Jihadi” or the “School of the fighting-Salafi ideology,” a program quite at odds with that adopted by Muslim Brotherhood organizations like Hamas. Followers of al-Qaida, it should be noted, are “salafists,” that is to say -- a person is a “salafi” if he or she follows takes their inspiration from a literary copying of the practice of the first community of believers - who were known as “Tabi’in.”²

Hamas believes in the comprehensiveness of the application of Islam in all walks of life -- in a person’s belief system, and in a society’s politics, economy, education, law, the arts, and the media. The belief in the “comprehensiveness of the application of Islam in all walks of life” is what the Muslim Brothers in Palestine and elsewhere in the Arab world have been preaching and attempting to apply for decades, with varying degrees of success. That program stands in stark contradistinction from the program al-Qaida, which has adopted a program of armed Jihad as its sole mode of operation. Al-Qaida pays little or no attention the idea of reforming societies from within and eschews the effectiveness of transforming societies through peaceful means.³

Hamas adopts the principle of gradualness, both with regard to the creation of an Islamic society and an Islamic state, as well as the liberation of occupied Muslim land. Hamas defends its position and beliefs through a clear citation of defensible policies derived from the Koran, where a program of the principle of gradualness is defended at length. The concept of a “hudna” -- a ceasefire with an enemy in order to accomplish a program of political victory -- is derived from the Prophet’s own tactics during his conflicts with the pagans of Mecca. Al-Qaida, however, strongly rejects this methodology and dismisses the concept of truce or coexistence with “the enemy” as either incompatible with the Sharia or

¹ There are certain exceptions. For example, the Muslim Brothers started an armed insurrection against the Alawite minority regime of Hafez al Asad in Syria in 1982. However, even during this insurrection, which was justified by the ruthless nature of the regime, the MB didn’t target civilians.

² “Tabi’in” literally means “followers”, e.g. Children of the Companions of the Prophet.

³ Jihad means “striving” and connotes -- but is not confined to just war --usually against oppression.

inexpedient to the cause of Islam.⁴

Hamas believes in the principles of political participation and effecting change through direct involvement in the political system. Hamas has proven its dedication to this principle by fielding candidates and taking part in national Palestinian elections and in participation in municipal and district Palestinian elections. Hamas's internal governing process also reflects its commitment to democratic governing principles -- and Hamas officials are held to standards set by constituent groups that are representative of a broad-based polity. Al-Qaida, on the other hand, explicitly prohibits any participation in parliamentary or other elections on the grounds that these councils are ruled by Kufar -- in other words, they are un-Islamic. Moreover, Al-Qaida judges all Arab regimes as "kufriya" or infidel, as they traffic with regimes or governments that are representative or that, according to the al-Qaida ideology, are themselves "disbelievers."

In a very specific and localized sense, Hamas applies its beliefs and principles in its conflict with Israel. Hamas believes that the conflict with Israel should be confined to the Palestinian theatre (in Palestinian lands and in Israel proper) for tactical, organizational, pragmatic and military reasons. In keeping with this principle, the Islamic Resistance Movement has never purposely targeted foreigners in any of its military actions. In contrast, al-Qaida believes that the entire world should be the theatre of Jihad against the enemies of Islam -- and not just non-Muslims. Al-Qaida has acted on this principle, attacking both Muslims and foreigners throughout the region and the world.

Hamas rejects al-Manhaj al Takfiri -- the doctrine of judging opponents as disbelievers or apostates -- and does not allow itself to be drawn into judging existing Arab-Muslim regimes as un-Islamic, as Kafr. Instead, the movement seeks to build positive relations with all Arab and Muslim states on the basis of mutual respect and generally refrains from interference in their internal affairs. In contrast, al-Qaida ascribes apostasy to nearly all existing Arab regimes and governments, and sees no need for establishing relations with them for religious and practical considerations. Additionally, Hamas rejects the principle of using violence against Arab and Muslim societies,⁵ and opposes overthrowing these regimes simply for the purposes of establishing Islamic political authority. Hamas says it believes in the sanctity and inviolability of the Muslim (and human) blood, except when in self-defense. Unlike Hamas, al-Qaida's program and belief structure on this point is quite different. Al-Qaida allows for the use of violence against Arab and Muslim regimes and governments as well as all those associated or affiliated with them, on the grounds that these governments are un-Islamic or anti-Islamic ruling by force over Muslim peoples.

⁴ In fact, the concept of "truce" or "Sulh" is well-established in Sharia as is evident from *Sulh al Hidaybiya (the truce of Hidaybiya)*, which the Prophet Muhammad forged with the Pagans of Qaraysh.

⁵ Hamas says its attacks against Israeli civilians are justified, not by theology, but rather by Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians.

Al-Qaida believes in the so-called “tamatus doctrine” which permits its fighters to kill Muslims in the context of fighting an enemy, especially if these Muslims happen to be in the vicinity of targeted military action. This doctrine explains why large numbers of Muslims are being killed in bombings carried out by al-Qaida operatives in Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt. Al-Qaida claims that according to the “tamatus doctrine” its actions are defensible -- for all Muslim civilians killed in such actions will go to heaven, depending on their intentions and piousness. While Hamas makes a careful distinction between hostile western governments and the citizens of those countries, al-Qaida makes no such distinction, believing that non-Muslim governments, armies and ordinary citizens are all legitimate targets for its military operations. In sum, Hamas believes that doctrinal, religious or other differences including disbelief in Islam does not serve as a moral basis for war against non-Muslims and, further, that conflict is only justified by the presence of oppression and aggression by an enemy that targets Muslims.⁶

Hamas also recognizes and calculates the actual balance of power in its struggles and does all it can to retain its means of resistance and maintain its survival as a movement. The Islamic Resistance Movement prides itself on its independence -- on its place as a central political force in the larger Palestinian struggle to end the Israeli occupation. In this respect, Hamas sees nothing wrong in establishing temporary alliances, even partnerships, in order to create a semblance of balance with the enemy. Hamas has a tactical policy based on the neutralization of as many potential enemies as possible, and tries to build friendly relationships with as many potential friends as possible.⁷ Al-Qaida is much less concerned with shaping alliances or building a consensus movement, since Jihad itself -- and not necessarily victory -- is a primary goal. Jihad (struggle) for Hamas is a means, not an end in itself, but for al-Qaida jihad is the goal and a primary expression for an individual true Muslim.

Castigating Hamas

Prior to the 2006 legislative elections in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, al-Qaida praised Hamas for its “Jihad” against Israel and also for rejecting the Oslo Accords. But al-Qaida’s tone began to change appreciably after the Islamic Resistance Movement announced that it would participate as a political party in

⁶ For example, Hamas, like the Muslim Brothers, cites Quranic verses such as the following in stressing the prohibition on targeting innocent people: *[60:8]* (GOD does not enjoin you from befriending those who do not fight you because of religion, and do not expel you from your homes. You may befriend them and be equitable towards them. GOD loves the equitable. [60:9] GOD enjoins you only from befriending those who fight you because of religion, evict you from your homes, and band together with others to banish you. You shall not befriend them. Those who befriend them are the transgressors.)

⁷ A classical example is Hamas’s friendly relation with Russia, despite the latter’s ruthless repression of Muslim rebels in Chechnya.

the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections. Just over one year later, in February of 2007 -- when Hamas and Fatah signed the Saudi-mediated Mecca Agreement -- Ayman al Zawahiri, al-Qaida's second-in-command, castigated Hamas for sacrificing the Sharia for the sake of an agreement with the secularists.

Zawahiri's condemnation of Hamas symbolizes the depth of disagreement between al-Qaida and the Islamic Resistance Movement: "I ask the leadership of Hamas, first, not to turn away from the rule of Sharia, and to only agree to participate in elections on the basis of an Islamic constitution. And I ask it, second, that if it is given the choice between abandoning government and abandoning Palestine, it should abstain from government, hold on to Palestine and choose Jihad and resistance instead of a third of the seats in the municipal councils of Gaza and Ramallah."⁸

Zawahiri's condemnation of Hamas was intended to place Hamas outside of the community of believers. He finished his condemnation by noting that, in his view, "the culture of concession and methodology of backtracking bore their evil fruits, and [the] Hamas leadership agreed to participate in the aggression against the rights of the Muslim Umma in Palestine. I request every Muslim to look at this map to appreciate the ugliness of the crime in which the leadership of Hamas took part."⁹

In addition to this condemnation, Zawahiri accused Hamas of becoming part of the official Arab "consensus" which "surrenders to America," saying that those Arabs who sell the land of the Muslim nation represses the Muslim Umma ever as much as the Americans and its Zionist allies. These movements and leaders, Zawahiri noted, are in league with the crusaders; they are as great an enemy of Islam as barbarians. "They have truly become part of this hated consensus which sits on the chest of our Umma."¹⁰ Zawahiri also denounced Hamas for agreeing to form a national unity government with Fatah: "Where is this homeland around which they have united? Where is the Palestine of 1948, the Palestine buried in the cemetery of oblivion? Have they abandoned its people? Have they surrendered them to the Jews? I won't ask them where is Chechnya, or where is Kashmir, or where is Iraq, or where is Somalia. Rather I will ask them where is Galilee? Where is Akka? Where is Jaffa? Where is Haifa? To whom have they surrendered them? To Mahmoud Abbas, America and Israel? And for how much have they sold them? For a third of the cabinet with a fourth of sovereignty on a

⁸ Al-Zawahiri referred to the Palestinian legislative council (in Gaza and West Bank) as "*municipal councils*" to belittle their significance since the entire PA regime was under Israeli military occupation and has no sovereignty or real authority.

⁹ See transcript of Ayman al Zawahiri speech on May 5, 2007, audiotape released by Abu Ayyoub al Masri, aka Abu Hamza al-Muhajir.

¹⁰ Ibid.

tenth of a homeland?”¹¹

In September, 2007, another leader of al-Qaida lashed out at Hamas for abandoning Jihad and deviating from the Sharia. “We caution some of the Islamic groups, among them Hamas, which are risking the blood of their sons ... to cleanse and purify their jihad of contemporary jihadi pollutants,” said Abu Yahia al-Libi in a 90-minute videotape.¹² “Patriotism, nationalism, shared unity, the supreme interests of other slogans ... None of these have any space in the religion of Allah the Glorious and the Great.”¹³ Hamas did not publicly respond to al-Qaida’s broadside, but in July of 2007, Hamas leader Khalid Mashal was quoted as issuing a defense of Hamas’s position -- a direct response to Ayman al-Zawahiri: “ May God forgive him, I will not respond to his criticisms ... We will not lose our composure. But we say that we will not be unkind or hostile to those whom America and Israel hate. We have confidence in ourselves and our decisions, and we say to Zawahiri: Don’t be harsh to Hamas which has sacrificed many martyrs, including its own leaders; Hamas is an authentic movement that doesn’t sell out the rights of our people, and is following the line of the forerunners and is seeking to liberate our holy places by way of resistance.”¹⁴

Hamas spokespersons and websites in the occupied territories were less restrained than the Hamas leader. “We advise Zawahiri not to try to outbid Hamas,” one prominent website editorialized. “Everyone and every Muslim knows what Hamas is. We say to him ‘ahlo Makkata Adra bi-shi’abiha’ (the people of Makka know best the valleys of Makka). The statement was a clear message that Hamas believed that it, and not al-Qaida, was in the best position to be a judge of the political complexities of the Palestinian situation.”¹⁵

Pressuring Hamas, bolstering al-Qaida

While western pressure on the Islamic Resistance Movement -- which has reached draconian proportions, and most especially in the Gaza Strip -- has not resulted in either the implosion of the movement nor a significant loss in its popularity, it is both Israel and al-Qaida that are seen as the two main beneficiaries of the increasingly narrowed political horizons facing the movement. Israel is a

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See, Al-Qaida commander criticizes Hamas for abandoning jihad in new videotape, AP, Sept. 9, 2007.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See, “Khaled Mashal refuses to respond to Zawahiri” (www.Islamemo.cc/artocles) (Arabic website).

¹⁵ Statement by Ghazi Hamad, spokesman of the Gaza-based Hamas government, interview with al-Aqsa Radio, 12 July, 2007. Al-Zawahiri was also the target of severe criticisms by Hamas and pro-Hamas websites, see for example “لم تكن يوماً مع فلسطين أهيا الطواهي لتكون معها” (Zawahiri: you have never been for Palestine to be for it now), see, www.paldf.net/forum

beneficiary of al-Qaida's attacks on Hamas because it has helped root the Islamic Resistance Movement as a part of the greater battle between "Jews and Crusaders." The conflation of Hamas and al-Qaida's goals benefit Israel ever as much as an ideological confrontation between the two groups.

In fact, an effective high-profile presence of al Qaida in the occupied Palestinian territories would provide an unprecedented propaganda asset for the Jewish state - and one that would benefit Israel. The appearance of al-Qaida in the West Bank or Gaza would provide the Jewish State with a ready-made, plausible and effective excuse to take even more draconian measures against the Palestinian population. A robust al-Qaida presence in the occupied territories would provide a pretext for Israel to escalate the severity of its occupation, and would increase support for Israel in the West -- where "fighting terrorism" trumps any criticism of Israel as an occupying power. In these circumstances, the defense of Israel's occupation would be a foregone conclusion; it would be an even greater necessity than it is now. Israel's calculation, that extremism makes their occupation palatable, cannot be simply dismissed -- even in particularly quiet periods, Israel maintains its presence in the West Bank, and its attacks in Gaza, in order to preempt terrorist activities, and is rarely called to provide evidence that its military actions are necessary.¹⁶

Is it possible that the continued strangulation of the Islamic Resistance Movement, the economic and political embargo enacted against it, would push the movement into the arms of al-Qaida? None of the Palestinian Islamist leaders this author has interviewed has ever suggested that Hamas itself would become a branch of al-Qaida or that Khalid Mashal and Ismail Haniya would suddenly transform themselves into carbon copies of Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri. Quite the opposite: the highly disciplined Hamas leadership has charted a political course at odds with al-Qaida, and it would take an extraordinary event to shift that viewpoint. But the same is not true for the Hamas rank-and-file, according to observers of Palestinian society. According to Hani al-Masri, a prominent Palestinian political analyst, a likely scenario could be enacted whereby "many, perhaps thousands, of erstwhile Hamas activists and supporters join al-Qaida cells out of disenchantment with Hamas's inability to realize its political goals: "When and if they reached the conclusion that Hamas's ways were futile and would lead nowhere, these people would want to join the most extremist organizations," Masri says.¹⁷

Asked why Hamas supporters do not join al-Qaida now, especially in light of Israel's and America's efforts to destroy the movement, Masri said that Hamas is

¹⁶ Interview with Yosuf Abu Ras in Hebron, October 2007. Abu Ras has written a Master thesis (in Arabic) on the main motivations behind suicide bombings.

¹⁷ Interview with Hani Masri, (via Telephone) Oct. 2007.

now sufficiently strong to defend against these attacks and, further, that it serves as the main guarantee against the “proliferation of al-Qaida in Palestine.”¹⁸ Masri, who has written extensively on Hamas in the local Palestinian Arabic press in the West Bank, describes those who think that Hamas will continue to be the guarantor and political bulwark against the proliferation of al-Qaida as “day-dreamers” and “ignoramuses.” He notes: “These people should know that Hamas, like the rest of Palestinian political movements and factions, is not a constant in Palestinian political life. It is a variable, it is a means to an end, and the end is freedom and liberation from the Israeli occupation. So, if Hamas fails to reach that end, to achieve freedom for the Palestinian people, the people would simply shun Hamas and join another movement. And al-Qaida, not secular groups such as Fatah or the leftist factions, would be the most attractive alternative for angry and frustrated Hamas supporters.”¹⁹

Interestingly, Masri pointed out that -- should Hamas’s political program be viewed as a failure or should the prospects for peace be deemed absolutely unattainable by any Palestinian political party -- the Palestinian arena would become fertile soil for all kinds of extremist organizations, not just al-Qaida, since many Palestinians, religious and non-religious, would feel they had nothing to lose from engaging in an extended and uncompromising militant program. But how could a situation like this materialize in real terms? Some Palestinian intellectuals, like Abdul Sattar Qassem, Professor of Political Science at the Najah National University in Nablus, in the Northern West Bank, believe that al-Qaida is already making inroads in the occupied territories.

“It is already materializing,” Qassem says. “America, Israel and the Arab world are imposing a hermetic blockade on the Gaza Strip, by withholding Palestinian tax money, by barring Palestinians from accessing food and work and by starving the Gaza Strip in ways unprecedented since the Ghetto Warsaw. So, it may only be a matter of time before many people become suicidal. And going suicidal is now a collective syndrome haunting thousands, probably tens of thousands of Palestinian youths.” Professor Qassem goes on to note: “I am not saying that tens of thousands of Palestinian young men will suddenly commit suicide or become suicide bombers in reaction to the Israeli-American policy of narrowing their horizons and condemning them to open-ended claustrophobia. But it is crystal clear that many of them, probably most of them, will get radicalized and join the ranks of al-Qaida.”

I asked Professor Qassem why Palestinian youth would not choose a different course -- why for instance they would not join Fatah instead of al-Qaida. “Some of them might join Fatah,” he responded, “but the vast majority wouldn’t because Fatah’s way of thinking and behavior doesn’t attract them. These people are religious and are well-inculcated in religious doctrine, and it would be difficult for

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

them to join Fatah and retain their religiousness.”²⁰ Asked further how he thought Hamas would behave under such circumstances, he noted: “Hamas would preoccupy itself with the task of mere survival and likely devote its time and energy, not to politics, but to charitable, educational and civil services.”²¹

It is not out of the question that Israel, for its own strategic reasons, may well be interested in seeing al-Qaida gain a foothold in the occupied territories. While some Israeli commentators adamantly respond this is not the case, Israeli policies are polarizing the Palestinian political environment to the point where the prospect of al-Qaida gaining a foothold in Gaza or the West Bank may be more than a remote possibility. Otherwise, why continue the strategy of isolating Hamas without concomitantly building up Fatah? Israel’s policies are, in fact, serving to strengthen extremism -- Israel is fighting Hamas by striking its civilian and political infrastructure, by imprisoning its activists and political leaders (including lawmakers and cabinet ministers), and by closing its charities and institutions.

These counter-productive tactics mean very little or nothing to al-Qaida, which pays little attention to public opinion and has nothing to lose in terms of a civilian apparatus -- because it has none. So it is that al-Qaida would be freer and bolder than Hamas in attacking mainly Israeli civilian targets, using suicide bombings. Some Palestinian Islamist activists predict that should al-Qaida succeed in gaining a foothold in the occupied Palestinian territories, not only Israelis would be targeted but Palestinians (including Hamas), would be targeted as well. “We are talking about a nihilistic organization which believes in open-ended confrontation until the Day of Judgment,” one Hamas leader notes. “Al-Qaida views all those opposing, even differing with its ideology, as enemies that ought to be liquidated. I wouldn’t even rule out the possibility that al-Qaida would detonate car-bombs in the heart of Palestinian cities in order to spread terror in the heart of those who might dare oppose its ways.”²²

It is true that the vast bulk of Palestinians, especially in the West Bank, are not prone to adopting the al-Qaida mentality. Nevertheless, this viewpoint, particularly among Hamas’s younger supporters could be transformed if Western or Israeli pressure on the Palestinian people, and most especially on Hamas, continues to push Palestinians into more extreme acts. The view that al-Qaida could be strengthened by Israeli actions is reflected in the statements of a veteran Hamas leader in the northern Hebron region. He says that in a world of wolves and tigers, one has to be a wolf, or a venomous cunning snake in order to survive. “Israel didn’t want to make peace with Jordan after the 1967 war and got the

²⁰ Interview with Prof. Abdul Sattar Qassem, Oct. 2007.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview with A. Harb, Oct. 2007. (Harb asked that his full name not be mentioned for security reasons).

PLO; Israel didn't want to reach real peace with the PLO and Arafat, it got Hamas, and Israel refuses to make peace with Hamas and if this policy continues, then Israel would most probably get al-Qaida. And al-Qaida knows only one language, and that is killing and being killed," he says.²³

The Al-Qaida Presence in Palestine

When talking to foreign media, the Palestinian Authority, including both Fatah and Hamas, routinely dismiss the presence of al-Qaida in the occupied Palestinian territories as "negligible" and "nearly non-existent." The argument voiced often is that Palestinian Islam is moderate and that Palestinian society is historically tolerant and culturally diverse, mostly because of the existence of an important, though shrinking, Christian minority, and because of the Palestinians' historical cultural contacts with the West. While these claims have a certain validity, they cannot be taken for granted.

In May of 2007, and after a series of attacks on internet cafés, gunmen affiliated with al-Qaida attacked a school celebration in Rafah at the southern tip of the Gaza Strip, killing one person and injuring five others. The attackers, yet to be apprehended, did not issue a statement giving the reason for their attack, but if asked would probably have sought to justify the attack on the ground that the celebration involved "immoral" mixing of adolescent boys and girls. The attack on the school celebration invited angry responses from across the Palestinian political spectrum. The attacks were the first of their kind. Over the last several years, al-Qaida or its supporters are suspected of having carried out a series of attacks on internet cafés and at least one church in downtown Gaza. Moreover, a Christian bookshop owner, also in Gaza, was murdered in October, 2007 by unknown killers who were reputedly affiliated with al-Qaida.

The attack shook Palestinian society and, for a time, brought Palestinians of all political currents together in a single act of condemnation. Hamas strongly condemned the crime, vowed to apprehend the perpetrators and expressed solidarity with all religious views represented in Palestinian society: "Muslim-Christian relations in Palestine are stronger than to be affected by such a crime which has been committed by a criminal group. The Palestinian people, Muslims and Christians, belong to this land and are united in defending it."²⁴ The movement also called on the people of Gaza to be vigilant because "there are those who want to sow chaos, anarchy and insecurity."²⁵ On 21 October, 2007, Mahmoud al-Zahar, one of Hamas's senior leaders, led a delegation of government officials and Muslim dignitaries in a visit to the ancient Christian

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See, Hamas Condemns the Murder of a Palestinian Christian man in Gaza, Oct. 7, 2007, (www.Palestine.info.co.uk)

²⁵ Ibid.

Orthodox Church in downtown Gaza. The delegation met with the head of the Church and other Christian dignitaries. During the visit, al-Zahar stressed the “strength of umbilical bond between Muslims and Christians in Palestine in general and in Gaza Strip in particular.” Zahar added that “Muslims and Christians in Palestine were one people and have the same rights and same duties as equal citizens.”²⁶

The attack in Gaza was not a singular incident. In 2006 in the West Bank a number of churches were stoned and one was the target of arson. The attacks, the first ever in living memory, occurred soon after Pope Benedict XVI remarked that Islam was spread through the sword. His remarks were universally condemned by Palestinians, including leaders of the Hamas movement. After the West Bank and Gaza attacks Hamas and the Islamic Jihad leaders posted guards to protect Palestinian churches against possible further attacks. The show of Palestinian inter-religious solidarity does have political limits, however. For instance, Palestinian Islamist leaders are reluctant to tell the Western political leaders that a weakened Hamas could be translated into increased strength for al-Qaida. The reason for this is quite straightforward: Hamas doesn't want to appear to be too close to any western power lest its Islamic image suffer. Hamas also does not want to alienate many ordinary Muslims, especially in the Gulf region, who support both Hamas and al-Qaida.

Hamas, as Hamas' political advisor Ahmad Yousef wrote earlier this year, is “a bulwark in the face of radical and militant ideas and trends. Policies whose aim is the isolation or marginalization of Hamas will set the stage for the spread of extremist thinking in occupied Palestine.”²⁷ He goes on to note: “Allowing Hamas to participate in the Palestinian political process will encourage the growth and development of pragmatic ideas and instruments of political action. It will also allow tolerance and respect for pluralism and diversity to strike root in Palestinian political culture. The West should ask itself whether it wants the moderation and realism of Hamas or the dogmatism of radical groups that subscribe to the clash of civilizations theory.”²⁸ Yousef's words need to be listened to carefully if only because of the dangerous ramifications of a prospective proliferation of al-Qaida in Palestine. But the growth of al-Qaida inside the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza is only one aspect of the dangers posed by the takfiri organization.

There is a substantial Palestinian refugee population in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, which can be drawn into al-Qaida, especially if the political environments in those nations prove conducive to its growth. And while al-Qaida doesn't believe in nationalism, one would expect that sheer despair, of which there is

²⁶ See, www.maannews.net), 21 October, 2007.

²⁷ “Lift the Siege On Hamas,” Ahmed Yousuf, 24 Sep. 2007 (www.electronicintifada.net)

²⁸ Ibid.

already huge reservoirs, would drive many young Palestinians in the Diaspora into the lap of al-Qaida. Hence, the impact of an al-Qaida proliferation would be devastating in countries like Jordan, where over 50 percent of the population is Palestinian and where public opinion is decidedly anti-Israeli and anti-American. Thus, as Qassem argues, suicide bombings and car-bomb attacks would become routine events in those nations, just as they are in Iraq today. In short, the rise of al-Qaida in the West Bank and Gaza would have significant ramifications for Palestinians in the Diaspora -- and ramifications for the political stability of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.²⁹

²⁹ Enter Al-Qaida, by Khalid Amayreh, Al-Ahram Weekly, 10-16 May 2007 (www.ahram.org.eg)

Conclusion

There is little doubt that any significant growth in the power of al-Qaida in Gaza and the West Bank -- and also in the Diaspora -- will be at the expense of Hamas. Hence, it is quite likely that Hamas will make efforts to forestall this possibility by warning Palestinians against the dangers posed by al-Qaida's nihilistic ideology. Early in the summer of 2007, Hamas-affiliated religious scholars were already engaging radical salafi (ultra Orthodox Sunni Muslim activists), in exchanges that were aimed at attempting to convince them to release kidnapped British Journalist Allan Johnston. The scholars argued that the radicals' rigid radicalism was a divergence from the moderate ("wastiya") nature of Islam.³⁰ Eventually, Hamas's efforts bore fruit and Johnston was released unharmed. Unlike al-Qaida, Hamas considered Johnston a "Musta'aman" (a protected guest) who, the Hamas religious scholars argued, had entered Gaza not as a spy, but as a journalist to communicate Palestinian suffering to the outside world. Hence, his abduction and captivity were immoral and unlawful from the Sharia perspective. The kidnapers, on the other hand, argued that Britain, like the US and Israel, was in a state of war with all Muslims. They cited as their authority the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. The Hamas-affiliated scholars responded saying that things had changed much since ancient times -- when all citizens of a nation blindly followed their emperor. The Hamas scholars argued that many Britons, including Johnston himself, opposed the war in Iraq and the Israeli occupation.³¹

The Hamas-radical Sunni exchange may well be a portent of things to come, and it microscopes, in a single incident, the debate between moderate Islamist groups, like Hamas, and the emergent radicalism of Salafist Islam. Even so, it is abundantly clear that this exchange, while it succeeded in the Johnston case, could well fail in the future. Continued western sanctions against the Palestinians and the refusal of the West to recognize and differentiate between Islamist groups are significantly undercutting Hamas's abilities to argue a moderate position -- and are reinforcing the loss of faith felt by Palestinians in democratic institutions and the commitment that Hamas had made to good governance. Hence, while most Palestinians do not wish to see al-Qaida or other extremist groups gain a foothold in their communities, they may be unable to stop them from building a political infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that will promote their form of radical Islam. The power of such groups, then, is likely to increase -- particularly if Israel and its Western allies continue to narrow Palestinian political and economic horizons and take actions that undermine hopes for a just and lasting peace.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

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This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Conflicts Forum and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

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