

Salafi Jihadism in Gaza as Opposition to Hamas Rule

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Contemporary Salafi jihadist organizations and groups first emerged in the Gaza Strip in 2005. Their current number is unknown, but according to various estimates, there are only a few thousand members. As such, they are a marginal phenomenon in Hamas-ruled Gaza and do not pose a significant threat to Israel.

After Hamas's takeover of Gaza in 2007, Salafi jihadist leaders initially hoped the Hamas victory would help them in their ideological objectives, including when it came to attacking Israel. Yet when Hamas's conduct and what they saw as "political and religious compromises" blocked their ambitions, Hamas too became a legitimate target of their belligerent opposition. Indeed, positioned against both Israel and Hamas, the groups and organizations from this stream challenge and object to anything that contradicts their belief in violence. Israel is seen as the eternal enemy of Islam, while Hamas is targeted for being too "pragmatic" vis-à-vis Israel; for its incomplete enforcement of *sharia* law in the Gaza Strip; and for compromising on the values of Islam and accepting non-divine laws.

Salafi Jihadist Groups in Gaza: Background

The emergence of the Salafi movement in the Gaza Strip, which dates back to the 1970s, occurred when a number of Palestinian students, upon their return from Saudi Arabia, worked to support Saudi efforts to propagate Wahhabism and counter Khomeini's Iranian Shiite doctrine. Early Salafi supporters intentionally set themselves apart from Palestinian politics and the struggle with Israel, and assumed a fixed yet marginal role within the Gaza Strip. The movement's development was far from linear and difficult

to map in terms of both outreach and activities, overlapping at times with nationalist organizations, while at times characterized by isolation and seclusion, due to the deep suspicion toward them by many Palestinians.¹

The first organization documented in the Gaza Strip was Dar al-Kitab wa-al-Sunna, a non-violent Salafi *dawa* organization focused on preaching and education. The group was established in 1975 in Khan Yunis by Sheikh Yasin al-Astal, who was then a senior Salafi figure.²

After a long period of stagnation, the years 2005-2010 were generally a favorable time for the growth of the Salafi jihadist stream in the Gaza Strip, particularly in the wake of Israel's unilateral withdrawal in 2005 and Hamas's takeover in 2007. Indeed, in the months preceding Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in August-September 2005, a number of groups identified with the Salafi jihadist stream were established, taking advantage of the growing tensions between Fatah and Hamas and aiming at challenging the internal Palestinian balance of power. These groups also sought to institutionalize the connection between the centralized Palestinian national vision and the global jihad network.³ In their outlook, they stressed the importance of the Palestinian issue to Salafi jihadist ideologues, from Sayyid Qutb to Abdullah Azzam and even Osama bin Laden.⁴

The newly formed Salafi jihadist groups first began "moral policing" activities, for example by instigating violent attacks against internet cafes, video stores, hair salons, and all those they perceived as engaged in "non-Islamic" behavior. Some of the groups behind these attacks included the Saif al-Haq groups based in Beit Hanoun, in the northern Gaza Strip; Kataib Jund Allah; and Takfir wal-Hijra, led by Sheikh Mahmoud Joudeh, who lived in an isolated area between Khan Yunis and Rafah. Another prominent group was Jaysh al-Islam, which took responsibility for a number of violent attacks, including the kidnapping of the BBC reporter Alan Johnston in March 2007. Jaysh al-Islam publicized a number of declarations in which it criticized the Hamas movement for purportedly abandoning jihad in favor of political gains, while also expressing support for al-Qaeda, and declaring itself as al-Qaeda's branch in Palestine. The group was led by the Gaza arms dealer Mumtaz Dughmush.⁵

For al-Qaeda, the main Salafi jihadist organization at that time, the call to fight for the Palestinians was a central platform, with the group urging its supporters to end the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people and

return the Muslim land to its rightful owners. Indeed, one of the slogans of the mujahidin in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which were al-Qaeda's roots, was that the road to Kabul runs through Jerusalem. Later in its history, al-Qaeda would repeat these calls, with Osama Bin Laden's deputy and eventual successor, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, asserting that the Palestinian issue is uniquely capable of unifying the Muslim world.⁶ Nonetheless, in the wake of Hamas's participation in the 2006 elections and its subsequent takeover of the Gaza Strip, al-Qaeda's embrace of the Palestinian issue was replaced with starkly more hostile declarations, culminating in bin Laden's declaration that the Hamas movement had "lost its faith," due to its participation in democratic elections and because of its cooperation with Fatah. Joining forces with Palestinian organizations such as Fatah in order to achieve local aims before teaming up with the overall Islamic community was seen as a violation of the principle of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, which demands loyalty to Muslims and renouncement of all other affiliations or partnerships. Finally, Hamas's signing of international conventions and agreements, such as the Mecca Agreement of 2007, was interpreted as abandoning the goal of Palestinian jihad.⁷

In the Strip, these pronouncements were read as a call for organizations identified with al-Qaeda to oppose Hamas, leading to a number of violent conflicts, especially when Salafi jihadist organizations attempted to challenge Hamas's exclusive role and hegemony over Gaza. The most prominent incident occurred in 2009, when Hamas security raided the Ibn Taymiyah mosque in Deir al-Balah and killed 24 Salafi activists from the organization Jund Ansar Allah, including their leader Abdel Latif Moussa, who was seen by Hamas as dangerous due to his declaration with respect to establishing an "emirate" in Gaza.⁸

In the past decade, organizations belonging to the Salafi jihadist stream in the Gaza Strip evolved into a decentralized network inspired by the global jihadist camp, and sought to frame the Palestinian struggle as a pan-Islamic, rather than nationalist, cause. Alongside established groups or organizational networks, Salafi jihadist supporters also operate in loosely affiliated cells, adopting a variety of front names with clear Islamist connotations when taking responsibility for their activities, in a way that makes it difficult to clearly identify the groups or individuals behind them.⁹ An example of this ambiguity was the Jaljalat group, sporadic cells composed of activists who

used to belong to the military wing of Hamas and who occasionally joined forces to launch attacks against foreign and Israeli targets.

The emergence and strengthening of ISIS since the summer of 2014 breathed new life into Salafi jihadist activists in Gaza, and led a series of organizations from this camp to declare their support for the Islamic State and to establish new Salafi jihadist groups in the Gaza Strip, such as the Sheikh Omar Hadid Brigade Bayt al-Maqdis and the Group of Supporters of Islamic State in Jerusalem (Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bayt al-Maqdis). These groups expressed their unqualified support for the Caliphate and took an oath of loyalty to the leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Yet to their disappointment, this oath was rejected and did not lead to their official acceptance into Islamic State ranks as an independent Palestinian province.¹⁰

Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Gaza and Hamas

Despite the periodic confrontations between local Salafi jihadist organizations and Hamas, during times of war against Israel these actors also discover shared interests, leading to unity of ad hoc interests against a common enemy between Hamas and the rest of the Islamist streams in Gaza, including the Salafi jihadist groups. Yet in the absence of direct conflict, Hamas cracks down on Salafi jihadist groups and arrests their leaders and activists if they violate the temporary ceasefire that exists between Hamas and Israel.

At times, rocket fire toward Israel by Salafi jihadist groups has served as a form of protest. In response to Hamas arrests, these groups have fired rockets toward Israel, hoping that Israel in turn will escalate the situation and target Hamas, which Israel sees as the entity responsible for preventing all attacks from Gaza on its citizens. The Salafi jihadist organizations thus create a dilemma for Hamas – if the latter refrains from responding to Israel’s attacks, it will be seen as weak by the population of Gaza, and this will strengthen the Salafi jihadist camp’s claim to be the only representative of the “resistance” (*muqawama*) fighting against Israel. Alongside the Salafi jihadist groups in Gaza, there is another significant player that has entered the balance of power in the Strip: Wilayat Sinai, the Sinai-based “province” of the Islamic State that joined the subordinate provinces network in November 2014. There has been cooperation between the Sinai Province and the Salafi jihadist groups in Gaza, and at times between these actors and Hamas; but there is also considerable friction resulting from the clear ideological

differences between the Salafi jihadist camp and Hamas. Thus, Hamas's relations with the Islamic State and its branch in Sinai have fluctuated in recent years. While there has been cooperation on smuggling of weapons and people and medical treatment for Sinai Province members in Gaza, as well as some logistical and operational cooperation,¹¹ there has also been tension and friction, especially in the past year due to the pressure placed by Egypt on the Hamas leadership to end all assistance to the Sinai Province, which is in an all-out war with Egypt.¹² The harshest criticism expressed by the Sinai Province toward Hamas was made by the organization's new commander Abu Hajar al-Hashemi, who in a speech on December 22, 2016 accused Hamas of apostasy and treasonous collaboration with Israel and Egypt.¹³ A few months before, in April 2016, a Sinai Province militant even gave a masked interview to *al-Jazeera* and made clear that the fire directed toward Israel would come in response to the IDF's strikes in Sinai using F16 warplanes and drones.¹⁴

In this context, it is clear that any attempts to reach a broad agreement between Israel and the Gaza Strip under Hamas rule, whether via Arab or Western mediation, are likely to encounter fierce and active opposition from Salafi jihadist groups in both Gaza and Sinai. In such a situation, the Sinai Province, with the backing and support of the Islamic State, could increase its attempt to act as a spoiler. It seems that the firing of rockets from the Sinai Province toward Eilat in February 2017, which was accompanied by rocket fire from jihadists in Gaza,¹⁵ is only one tool that these groups could rely upon to challenge Hamas in response to the latter's attempt to strike a political bargain with Egypt, Israel, or the PA.

Notes

- 1 Khaled Hroub, "Salafi Formations in Palestine and the Limits of a De-Palestinised Milieu," *Holy Land Studies: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 2 (2008): 157-81.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Benedetta Berti, "Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 5 (2010): 5-9.
- 4 Barak Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Palestinian Problem," *Survival* 51, no. 4 (2009): 71-86.
- 5 Hroub, "Salafi Formations in Palestine and the Limits of a De-Palestinised Milieu."
- 6 Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Palestinian Problem."

- 7 Mark Habeck, "Al-Qa`ida and Hamas: The Limits of Salafi-Jihadi Pragmatism," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 2 (2010): 5-7.
- 8 Aviad Mandelbaum and Yoram Schweitzer, "The Influence of the Islamic State on Israel's Arab Citizens and on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank," *The Islamic State: How Viable Is It?* eds. Yoram Schweitzer and Omer Einav (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2016), pp. 155-62, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/influence-islamic-state-israels-arab-citizens-palestinians-gaza-west-bank/>.
- 9 Berti, "Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat."
- 10 Mandelbaum and Schweitzer, "The Influence of the Islamic State on Israel's Arab Citizens and on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank."
- 11 Avi Issacharoff, "Relations between Hamas and ISIS in Sinai: The Right Hand Arrests, the Left Hand Shakes Hands," *Walla*, August 1, 2016, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2965130>.
- 12 Avi Issacharoff, "Anger in Egypt: Growing Cooperation between Hamas and ISIS in Sinai," *Walla*, August 25, 2016, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2984199>.
- 13 "The Apostates Plan to Prolong the War against Them, in God's Will," *an-Naba* 60, December 22, 2016, pp. 8-9.
- 14 Amir Buhbut, "The Organization that is Spilling Egypt's Blood has Set its Sights on Israel," *Walla*, August 25, 2016, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2991429>.
- 15 Alon Ben-David, Or Heller, and Hezi Simantov, "4 Rockets Fired toward Eilat: Three intercepted, One Fell in an Open Space" *Nana 10*, February 9, 2017.