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Response to Abraham Accords Suggests Dwindling Role of Jerusalem in Sunni Terrorist Rhetoric

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Brief Analysis

Given the importance of the role Jerusalem has played in many Sunni terrorist organizations' public rhetoric in the past, one might have expected the response to the Abraham Accords to be correspondingly strong. Surprisingly, major Sunni terrorist organizations have largely disregarded or made only passing reference to the recently signed Abraham Accords. In contrast, Erdogan and other Islamist actors have continued and even increased their public identification with the cause as a useful tool in their ongoing bids for regional popularity.

ISIS leadership has cautioned against overemphasis on re-taking the Al-Aqsa Mosque under Islamic leadership for some time, and other Salafi jihadist groups have similarly placed relatively little emphasis on the Palestinian cause following the signing of the accords.

At most, a number of major Sunni terrorist organizations have published unremarkable news reports using language typical of rejectionist websites. Considering the deep Palestinian objections to the agreement—with some Palestinian leaders describing it as a stab in the back to Palestinians—extremist organizations' responses are curiously muted given the vocal support these jihadist groups have given to the Palestinian cause in the past.

So far, ISIS has given the Abraham Accords little weight in its regular publications. Since the August 13 announcement of the accords, ISIS has published eight editions of its newsletter *Al-Naba*, but only mentioned the agreement in one of them. Other organizations have either made no response at all, or addressed the issue with the same lack of energy exhibited in the ISIS response. The weakness of response is notable given the past vocal support these groups have expressed for the Palestinian cause, especially when compared with fiery public responses to the 2017 decision by Trump to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

Al-Qaeda is another fascinating example: its public writings frequently tout the Palestinian cause, and the cause has been a fixture of the group's ideology since its founding. Back in December 2017, the group quickly called on Muslims everywhere to go to Jerusalem in response to the plan to move the U.S. embassy. However, Al-Qaeda waited over a month from the signing of the Abraham Accords to issue a statement "on the Normalization of Ties with Israel by Arab Zionists." And though this document explicitly condemns the Gulf as responsible for "the complete sell out of the Palestinian cause," they call for a broader campaign to "target thereby Zionists- Jews and non-Jews- wherever they may be, in the Arabian Peninsula or in other parts of the Muslim World" and call for revolt within these countries themselves to "overthrow their despotic regimes" rather than the targeting of Jerusalem specifically.

Moreover, AQAP—one of the more active branches of Al-Qaeda, based in Yemen—appeared to actively ignore the Accords in a statement under the heading, "Statement on Media Reports of the Establishment of an Israeli Military Base on Socotra Island." The statement focused on rumors of the UAE and Israel building a spy base on the Yemeni island of Socotra, and while critical of the UAE, did not address the peace agreement or the Emirati position regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Similarly, the Somali jihadist group al-Shabaab, which also quickly responded to Trump's 2017 announcement, made no direct reference to the accords after their signing. While al-Shabaab's Shahada news agency did release a statement titled "Bayt al-Maqdis as the Meeting Point," calling Muslims to join a jihad with their lives and finances for the sake of Jerusalem, the statement refrained from any mention of the Abraham Accords.

Neither did the Syrian Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) issue an official statement about the accords, though it had previously published a statement on the announcement of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017, saying "We in Syria express our support for the Jerusalem cause, as it is the cause for all the Muslims, the free, and the honorable around the world. But the road to Jerusalem has turned out to be the road to every Sunni city in Syria, and while Israelis enjoy security, Syrian cities suffer from the ravaging destruction caused by the regime and its allies."

All these organizations saw the earlier U.S. decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem as a key moment for propaganda, so what makes the Abraham Accords different?

There is a potential argument here that ISIS's position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Jerusalem, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque has been steady for a long time now, and its reaction to the Abraham Accords reflects that history. In the past, ISIS has decried the act of invoking and enshrining the issue of Al-Aqsa Mosque at the expense of other more important problems for the Salafi jihadist agenda. This position is a potential reflection of the view of Ibn Taymiyyah, a fourteenth century Islamic thinker who has become a primary source of inspiration for Salafi-jihadists.: "The legitimate jihad is fighting the Jews in Palestine and the apostate tyrants (rulers of Muslim countries) and their followers everywhere at the same time, as well as the Crusaders and all the polytheists in the world. As for restricting jihad to the Jews only, it is a change to the law of God and follows the wishes of tyrants who want to prevent Muslims from waging jihad against the polytheists and apostates in the countries they rule."

However, it may also be that the Palestinian cause simply isn't an effective conduit for these groups' public rhetoric as it once was. These groups may be seeing that the Palestinian cause is no longer providing the same results in terms of mobilization and support for these groups as in past years. Thomas Hegghammer and others have shown that the representation of Palestinians in Al-Qaeda is very small compared with other nationalities. Moreover, after President Trump's speech regarding Jerusalem, terrorist organizations' calls urging their followers to fight for Jerusalem and the Palestinian cause had no tangible results on the ground.

On the other hand, Erdogan and Islamists like those in the Muslim Brotherhood are still exploiting the Palestinian cause; the Palestinian cause has played a foundational role in the Brotherhood’s discourse since its conception, evident in the writings of the group’s founder Hassan Albana in the 1930s. Yet after the group lost its popularity during the Arab Spring period, the rhetoric used by the group appeared to become a means of improving its public image.

And like the Brotherhood, President Erdogan has taken up the Palestinian cause as a political implement. In his attempts to appear as the caliph of the world’s Muslims and the defender of Muslims and Islamic sanctities, Erdogan has utilized pro-Palestinian rhetoric handily while emphasizing a Turkish connection to the land..

In response to the signing of the Abraham Accords, Erdogan threatened to cut ties with the UAE, criticizing the Gulf country for its “hypocritical behavior,” and Turkey’s foreign ministry earlier declared that Palestinian leadership was right to reject the deal. But Erdogan also notably emphasized Jerusalem’s Ottoman period by stating: “In this city that we had to leave in tears during the First World War, it is still possible to come across traces of of the Ottoman resistance. So Jerusalem is our city, a city from us.”

Put broadly, the ISIS views on the exaggerated value of the Al-Aqsa Mosque to the Salafi-jihadist movement may be winning out over Al-Qaeda’s earlier model, influencing a reduction of rhetoric around the Palestinian cause by terrorist organizations. As such, while many Salafi-jihadists seem to have lost their faith in the Palestinian cause as a rhetorical tool to boost support for their cause, Erdogan and Islamist groups see continued value in staking claims to the cause for themselves, demonstrating an alternative model of relying on this popular issue for self-gain.



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