

## How Terrorist Groups Use Jerusalem

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Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil is an Egyptian author and researcher who specializes in political Islam and extremist groups. He is also a researcher in Trends Research and Advisory in Abu Dhabi. He has authored several books, including "Contemporary Islamic Jihadist Thought," the "Apostate Brothers," and "The Salafist Dawa." Mohamed is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

January 25, 2018

"I have a few words for America and its people: I swear by God Almighty, who has raised the sky without pillars, America and anyone who lives there will never dream of security unless we have it in reality in Palestine, and until all infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad. God is great and glory be to Islam."

These were the words by late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in 2001, only days after the 9/11 attacks, when he [threatened](#)

[https://ar.wikisource.org/wiki/%D9%86%D8%B5\\_%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8\\_%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9\\_%D8%A8%D9%86\\_%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A](https://ar.wikisource.org/wiki/%D9%86%D8%B5_%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8_%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9_%D8%A8%D9%86_%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A) the United States using the Palestinian issue as a pretext and justification for his threats. And with every new development in the Palestinian challenge, these groups would issue statements, warnings, and threats.

Following the footsteps of his father, Hamza bin Laden said in a statement issued by al-Qaeda last year under the title "Jerusalem Is a Bride Whose Dowry Is Our Blood" that they must focus on Syria as the main gateway to liberate the Palestinian territories. Other al-Qaeda statements also include texts describing this as the ultimate goal.

In 2013, Thomas Hegghammer and others published an article [titled](#)

[http://hegghammer.com/files/The\\_Palestine\\_Effect\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_Palestinians\\_in\\_the\\_Transnational\\_Jihad\\_Movement.pdf](http://hegghammer.com/files/The_Palestine_Effect_The_Role_of_Palestinians_in_the_Transnational_Jihad_Movement.pdf) "The Palestine Effect: The Role of Palestinians in the Transnational Jihad Movement," concluding that Palestinians made up a very small portion of al-Qaeda compared to other nationalities, even though the liberation of Jerusalem was one of the pillars on which the group was established.

The position of the Islamic State on this topic has not received as much attention from researchers and analysts. However, Dutch-Palestinian researcher Samar Batrawi concluded in [a study](#) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2015-10-28/what-isis-talks-about-when-it-talks-about-palestine> that the Islamic State position was no different from that of al-Qaeda, as it often appeared on the scene under the names Bayt al-Maqdis (a reference to the al-Aqsa mosque) or Ard al-Masra (Land of Jerusalem). The Islamic State also released several statements under the following titles: "Letter to the Fathers on the third of the Two Holy Mosques; Letter to the Mujahideen in Bayt al-Maqdis; People of Bayt al-Maqdis: Terrorize the Jews; Letter of encouragement and support for our people in Ard al-Masra; The true promise is nigh; Where are the revolutionaries in the land of Palestine?; Restore terror to the Jews."

In effect, the Islamic State went beyond speaking of the Palestinian question and its importance to the group. Instead, it criticized internal movements, as mentioned in one of its [statements](#) <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9/>: "Do not expect victory from Fatah or Hamas. Do not pay attention or even look at them, as their statements and slogans are void and futile."

Worse still, the Islamic State not only criticized internal groups, it also considered that anyone who frames the conflict as a national cause takes it out of its main frame, thus becoming an enemy. "The conflict with the Jews is religious and ideological, not national or over land or borders drawn by colonization," according to a statement.

After the recent speech by President Donald Trump, where he announced the decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, large and small jihadi Salafi groups issued many statements in response, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which issued a statement on January 7 calling on Muslims around the world to move towards Jerusalem. As for the Islamic State, it [published](#) <http://www.dar-alifta.org/AR/Viewstatement.aspx?sec-media&ID=5576> a piece in issue 109 of al-Naba newspaper titled "The Guardians of Bayt al-Maqdis are None but the Righteous," arguing against mere mention of Jerusalem in slogans and positioning itself as the defender and fighter for all Islamic countries, not only Jerusalem. Under the title "Bayt al-Maqdis as the Meeting Point," the al-Shabab al-Mujahideen movement issued a statement calling on all Muslims to join Jihad with their lives or money and offering support to anyone who wants it by establishing camps for combat training.

Egypt's Hasm movement also issued a statement in response to Trump's speech, calling for the revival of the Intifada and using the Palestinian question to justify its actions in Egypt. It also stressed that Jerusalem cannot be liberated before the liberation of Cairo and [declared](#) <https://hasamegypt.com/?tag=%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A> its ultimate goal to be "the liberation of the al-Aqsa Mosque or martyrdom on its holy threshold. "Jerusalem will never be liberated as long as Cairo remains in captivity," Hasm said in its statement.

In the same exploitative context, Syria's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham issued a statement titled "A statement on the declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of the Jews," in which it said, "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."

The question remains: What does the Palestinian issue mean to terrorist groups?

Extremist groups have used it as a strong pretext to attract more extremists, but this is where the importance of the issue stops among these groups, using it to justify recruitment of fighters who are then sent to carry out operations in other areas and with different targets. They are motivated by the idea that these targets, whether a near or far enemy, are waging a war against Islam and Muslims. Thus, the recruits' idea of an enemy starts at Israel and expands to include other countries that the groups want to target, gradually ignoring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which turns into the subject of slogans and statements, with the occasional operation that uses the issue as a motive.

Despite many al-Qaeda leaders speaking of Palestine as a unique area in intense emotional language, particularly Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda's second-in-command Abu Yahya al-Libi did not consider Palestine any different from other areas targeted by the group and the Salafi jihadi movements. This was evident in his statement titled "Reflections on the [Islamic] scholars' statements on Gaza."

"Thus, we can conclude that jihad has become a legitimate duty in Palestine, which is no different from other occupied Muslim countries. Palestine did not earn this religious ruling because its land is blessed or because it has al-Aqsa Mosque or for the privileges of its people. It earned this ruling because it is a Muslim land invaded by an infidel enemy. Based on this, the ruling applies to any Muslim land under the same circumstances as Palestine. Those who want to differentiate between countries or lands or parties will clash with the existing consensus of

scholars,” al-Libi said (<https://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=407388>).

Finally, the positions of these groups on Trump’s speech signal upcoming operations in the United States and allied countries. They will be carried out for Jerusalem as a matter of form, but primarily to achieve other goals according to each group’s own interests. However, what is more serious about these operations is that with every development in Palestine, analysis and opinions emerge to criticize jihadi-terrorist groups and their position on the Palestinian question, as well as their absence from the scene there.

Although no one denies that these are terrorist groups whose actions are nowhere near righteous, even if they aim their cannons at Israel, the serious question about their role regarding the Palestinian issue lies in that it may motivate them or other terrorist groups to shift from merely speaking of the issue in discourse and statements into operations on the ground, similar to the liberation of Afghanistan, especially since the region is witnessing a decline and near end of the Islamic State’s central leadership. This may also make way for increasing numbers of fighters joining these groups to liberate Palestinian areas, and it may increase the number of extremists in the region.

Perhaps these terrorist groups adopt the principle of “taking advantage of the situation,” restructuring and shaping themselves within the context of the conflict, particularly since al-Qaeda wants to return and regain control over the scene. Thus, among terrorist groups, raising such questions can be understood as a sort of support and introduction to a new activity at a time when Trump’s remarks provoked outrage among Muslims in various regions.

It should be noted that Arab governments, as well as Hamas, strictly reject the presence of Salafi jihadi elements in the Palestinian. This was evident in assigning the dialogue with the Palestinian youths from these groups to Hamas leading official Yunis al-Astal, who has in the past years held dialogue with alafi jihadists, attempting to push them towards a moderate discourse and rejecting violence. It was also evident in security operations against Salafi jihadi groups after one of their fighters carried out a terrorist attack on the Egyptian-Palestinian border in August 2017, when he blew himself up at the Palestinian security checkpoint.

It should also be pointed out that analysts and various media outlets must be careful when tackling this issue, focusing on the role of Salafi jihadi groups on the Palestinian issue, as they may increase the number of Palestinians joining these groups and directly contribute to threatening their lives, as seen in the attack on the Palestinian security checkpoint.

Thus, the media must explain, warn, and spread awareness to stress that these groups only use Palestinian goals as a pretext to recruit fighters who carry out external operations irrelevant to the cause or internally affecting the lives of Palestinian citizens. ❖

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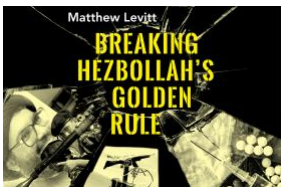
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