

Hamas Is Going Through a Rough Patch, So What Is It Singing About?

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Given the violent message the group continues to convey in Arabic to viewers young and old, it will be difficult to achieve full Palestinian reconciliation, a long-term ceasefire with Israel, or large-scale reconstruction of Gaza.

Hamas is, to put it mildly, going through a rough patch. It acceded to a National Unity Government agreement in which none of its key demands were met; it is in the process of relinquishing control of the Gaza Strip, which it had ruled since 2007, to its Palestinian rival, Fatah; it lost key support from benefactors, first in Tehran and then in Cairo; and it suffered hundreds of casualties, the destruction of dozens of tunnels, and elimination through use or destruction of some two-thirds of its rocket arsenal during the 50-day war with Israel in July and August. Hamas spent three to five years digging these attack tunnels into Israel, at the cost of tens of millions of dollars, and has nothing to show for its effort -- ingenious though it was. Even as donors pledge billions of dollars for Gaza reconstruction, a large portion of the money is actually intended for Palestinian Authority (PA) budgetary support and even actual reconstruction funds are to be provided only through the PA, not Hamas.

As it now struggles to regain its footing, Hamas has presented different public faces to various audiences. Khaled Mashal, Hamas's leader, conveyed a relatively moderate and reasonable message when he granted an interview to

Charlie Rose of PBS in August, for example. But the propaganda Hamas prepares for local consumption, in Arabic, is very different indeed.

As The Washington Post recently reported, Hamas's radio station in Gaza "reports on the sunny side of [the] Islamist movement's rule." But that's not the half of it. Arabic language output from the group tends to be far more violent and uncompromising than the public face Mashal put forward for PBS. Videos known as nasheeds are a popular medium for spreading propaganda. A typical nasheed shows members of Hamas's Qassam Brigades training and supposedly battling Israelis, as rousing music plays. In the six months leading up to the summer conflict, the lyrics of Hamas's nasheeds urged violent confrontation against Jews and "sons of Zion," in defense of Arabs' land and honor. One such soundtrack urges watchers to "strike the Jews," while others promise endless battle and refusal to compromise. Messages of blood and violence are reiterated in nearly every video, paired with religious obligations to fight in the name of jihad. "We swear to attack you with the Army of Mohammad, wait for us sons of Zion," threatens one. "In one hand we carry our Qur'an and in another we carry our rifle," boasts another.

Hamas nasheeds feature catchy tunes, sometimes taking melodies from well-known popular and traditional Arabic songs and substituting their own lyrics. Hamas keeps up a fairly steady stream of nasheeds, posting roughly one nasheed a month over the past year. Most are published in a general context of "resistance," though the pattern changed slightly after May. While there was no video in June, Hamas published two nasheeds in July, during the fighting. The group shifted from promises and exhortations to celebrating their current "achievements." The first July nasheed boasts, "We did not forget our land. ... We are coming back from all over the world." The second, published a week later, triumphantly announces the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, Oron Shaul. (Shaul was later confirmed to have been killed, though his body was not recovered.)

That same month, Hamas also released a new song intended not for fellow Palestinians but as a form of psy-ops targeting the Israeli public: a Hebrew language Hamas ditty whose loosely translated title called on people to "Get Up and Carry out Terror Attacks!" and calls for killing or expelling all Jews from Israel. That particular effort didn't work out so well for Hamas. The Hamas singers' inability to pronounce some Hebrew letters, and their use of arcane Hebrew words, was funny enough to undermine the singer's explicit calls for violence. The tune became an unintended summer hit among Israelis, a feel good tune that, as one Israeli analyst put it, was the "de facto anthem of the Israeli war effort."

Hamas quickly reverted back to Arabic language ditties, intended for Palestinian, not Israeli, consumption. In August, after Israeli ground forces left Gaza and talk of a cease-fire with Israel and reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority picked up pace, Hamas crooned, "There is not going to be reconciliation. Here are our rifles; we use them in the name of Islam."

For those not yet old enough to take up Hamas's rifles, the group aims to prepare Palestinian youth to be ready and willing when the time comes. In May, a children's show on Hamas's al-Aqsa TV featured Nahoul the Bee, a Barney-like children's television character who encouraged his young viewers to punch Jews and throw stones at them. In the same clip, an older girl, acting as interviewer, expressed satisfaction at a younger girl's intention to shoot all the Jews.

The man who dressed up as the Hamas bee -- a recurring character who replaced a mouse that was too reminiscent of Mickey for Disney's liking -- was played by Muhammad al-Arir. After al-Arir was killed in the war, Hamas dedicated a program in August to the "heroic martyr," promising that his "show would go on." The segment ended with a 6-year-old girl telling her teenage host that she hoped Allah would "gouge out [the Jews'] eyes."

All of this is a world apart from the fervent yet measured tone taken by Khaled Mashal on Charlie Rose. Throughout, Mashal sought to portray Hamas as having been forced to violence by Israel. "We do not wish the killing to continue,"

said Mashal. He proclaimed his desire to coexist peacefully with adherents of all religions, including Jews. And though he could not bring himself to say he wanted to coexist with the state of Israel, he deferred to the Palestinian people to make the final decision. Hamas, said Mashal, is a moderate, not fundamentalist, organization.

That might be an effective message for a Western audience, but Nahoul the Bee fundamentally disagrees. There is nothing in the least bit moderate about the violent message he and the makers of Hamas nasheeds convey in Arabic to fellow Palestinians, young and old. And so long as that remains the case, prospects for Palestinian reconciliation, a long-term cease-fire with Israel or large-scale reconstruction of the Gaza Strip will remain depressingly low. That might make Nahoul the Bee happy, but it's nothing to sing about.

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