

Hamas on the Ropes

by [Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Jun 27, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Neri Zilber, a journalist and analyst on Middle East politics and culture, is an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

With a massive Israeli crackdown under way, the militant Palestinian movement is struggling to determine its true identity.

Ramallah, West Bank -- "The whole region...is in crisis," Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a prominent West Bank leader of Hamas, told me recently. "And Hamas is also in crisis."

Later that same day, June 12, three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped while hitchhiking outside the West Bank settlement of Gush Etzion. Israeli authorities quickly blamed the terror attack on Hamas, and Yousef was arrested the next night by the Israeli army in his home outside Ramallah in the early stages of a rescue operation that has now evolved into a wider crackdown on Hamas personnel and infrastructure.

Israeli authorities haven't released all they know, including direct evidence of Hamas's culpability, due primarily to concerns about ongoing operations. On Thursday, though, Israeli's internal security service, the Shin Bet, did name two known Hamas operatives, Marwan Qawasmeh and Amer Abu Aysha, as the prime culprits behind the kidnapping. The two men, who are from the southern West Bank city of Hebron, simply disappeared on the day of the kidnapping. For its part, Hamas has coyly refrained from taking responsibility for the abduction, while at the same time publicly lauding the act.

Yet the more interesting question on the minds of security professionals and analysts in Israel is whether the act was sanctioned by at least part of the group's leadership, or undertaken by a rogue cell working out of Hebron. "We are confident Hamas is behind this attack and that the operatives are Hamas," Lt. Col. Peter Lerner, an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman, stated last week. "But we can't say whether they received a directive from Gaza or abroad."

Yousef's admission that Hamas is in crisis came as part of a discussion on the recent reconciliation agreement signed between the Islamist movement, which since 2007 has ruled the Gaza Strip, and its secular rival Fatah, which controls the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA).

When I met Yousef in his tidy, dimly lit offices in Ramallah, I pointed out that the implementation of the deal didn't

seem to be going in Hamas's favor. If anything, it seemed Fatah was dictating the terms: The new "unity" government formed this month retained most senior ministers close to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas but not one Hamas representative, while an estimated 40,000 public-sector workers in Gaza loyal to the Islamist group had still not been paid their salaries. Moreover, the committee tasked with vetting the Hamas employees for integration into PA institutions would not even begin its work for a few months. And, according to sources in Ramallah, it too did not include a single Hamas representative but, rather, PA "technocrats" from various ministries.

Yousef didn't refute any of these points, but instead let out a short laugh. "We are present on the ground, and you can't deny our existence," he said with a wry smile. "We're satisfied by the public support [we have], underground."

The problem for Hamas, though, is that its failing seven-year experiment governing Gaza has cost it significant public backing. According to a poll released this week by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, if elections were held today for PA president, Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Meshaal would only garner a combined 15 percent in Gaza -- compared to Abbas's strong plurality of 30 percent. Indeed, a remarkable 70 percent of Gazans agreed with the sentiment that Hamas should maintain a cease-fire with Israel, and a majority even stated that Hamas should accept Abbas's position of renouncing violence against Israel -- all indications of the Palestinian public's lack of faith in Hamas strategy.

The Islamist group is clearly under pressure, in particular from Egypt. The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo last summer and the subsequent military-led crackdown on the smuggling tunnels connecting Gaza to the Egyptian Sinai have cut off Hamas's main source of revenue, effectively bankrupting the movement. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, official unemployment in the coastal enclave is over 40 percent -- and the actual number is likely even higher. Meanwhile, Hamas personnel have gone unpaid for some eight months, and humanitarian conditions -- food security, electricity, water, and sanitation -- have all deteriorated. Many PA officials I spoke to in Ramallah explained Hamas's seeming capitulation in the reconciliation process as a function of the Islamist group's now untenable hold over Gaza.

The Israeli and Egyptian blockade of Gaza appears to have finally succeeded. Despite his claims that the "international siege" of Gaza had failed, Yousef went on to argue that the responsibility of governance was a millstone around any party's neck. "The sovereign loses," Yousef declared. "We [tell Abbas] 'take.' Hamas is [now] responsible for nothing."

There is one tool that Hamas retains in its arsenal that the PA has officially relinquished -- the willingness to use violence against Israel. While Yousef extolled the "wisdom" and "flexibility" of Hamas's recent political moves, he did emphasize ominously that Hamas still retained "many options," unlike the PA, "which only has the option of negotiation." Yousef then went on to issue an open threat against Israel if the situation in Gaza continued in its downward trajectory, declaring that an "explosion would happen...and that Israel will be the first target of this explosion."

Despite such rhetoric, it was far from clear that Yousef was looking for an immediate confrontation. The sheikh is a leader in Hamas's political bureau, a faction thought to be more moderate than the militants in Hamas's military wing and elite Ezzedine al-Qassam terror brigades. Two days before our meeting, he had been assaulted by PA security forces during a rally for Palestinian administrative detainees held in Israeli jails -- but instead of escalating the situation, he sufficed with a formal complaint to the Palestinian Authority. His Hamas cadres chose to "surrender our rights," he told me, as "we don't want to make the situation tense -- we want to calm the situation down."

Such outward pragmatism was either a feint or a sincere statement that fell on deaf ears. Hours later, alleged Hamas operatives kidnapped the three Israeli youths, Yousef was on his way back to Israeli prison, the IDF was embarking on its largest military operation in the West Bank in a decade, and the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation deal was in

imminent danger of collapse. The situation had indeed become tense.

For the Israeli authorities, whether the kidnapping was sanctioned by the Hamas leadership or the work of a rogue cell appears to be a distinction without a difference. Israel has already moved beyond the narrow initial objective of bringing the boys home to striking a blow against Hamas's infrastructure in the West Bank. According to the IDF, three additional infantry brigades have been deployed to the Palestinian territory, making for a total of nine brigades in the field -- as well as special operations forces, intelligence, and aerial assets. Over the past two weeks, approximately 1,200 separate locations have been raided or searched all across the West Bank, from refugee camps to universities, caves to water wells. As one senior IDF officer put it to me, "Hamas has to pay a substantial price for supporting and striving for such attacks."

Given that the kidnapers likely emanated from Hebron, however, the IDF has focused most of its attention on that Palestinian city, the West Bank's largest. On the night following the abduction, Israeli forces raided the home of Osman Qawasmeh, 26; he is now one of nearly 400 Palestinians, overwhelmingly from Hamas, detained since the kidnapping.

One day last week, I visited the Qawasmeh family's home off of Hebron's main Ein Sara Street in the densely packed neighborhood of el-Haras. The house is a modest and sparse dwelling, with walls of peeling paint and three faded couches in the living room. The Qawasmehs are one of Hebron's largest clans, with deep ties to Hamas. Indeed, a long line of Qawasmeh kin have been Hamas fighters and suicide bombers in the past -- including Osman's uncle, Abdullah Qawasmeh, who was Hamas's military chief in Hebron until he was killed by Israeli forces in 2003 not far from where I now sat over coffee and watermelon with Osman's mother and father.

Now, another Qawasmeh, Marwan, is wanted by the Israelis for his involvement in the kidnapping. While neither Osman nor his parents have been directly implicated in the incident, this was the social and political milieu from which the kidnapers would have sprung.

Osman's father, Abu Abdullah, 65, an electrician by trade, is a slight man with a full gray beard, pious and soft-spoken. As three of his grandchildren played between the couches, Abu Abdullah emphasized that he was "a peaceful man...but I can't pressure my sons and others to adopt my thinking...They grow up to see oppression against them."

I was curious to know what Abu Abdullah and his wife thought of the reconciliation deal Hamas had struck, as well as the recent kidnapping. Did the Hamas rank and file in a place like Hebron see things differently than their leaders? Was all the recent talk about Palestinian "unity" meaningless to those on the ground?

For the Qawasmeh family, reconciliation with the PA seemed a long way off. The concerned parents began the discussion not with politics but with a lengthy disquisition about their recently arrested son and, graphically, the finer points of the Palestinian security services' interrogation methods. Osman, they said, had spent the last few years shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian jails, and had only recently begun university studies.

In Abu Abdullah's telling, the prisoner issue was a small example of the larger system of oppression directed at the Palestinian people by "the two authorities" -- meaning not just Israel but the Palestinian Authority as well. Both Abu Abdullah and his wife saved their most excoriating comments for the PA, which they saw as "servants and puppets" of Israel and "Blackwater-type" mercenaries.

Given such sentiments, I inquired, what did my hosts make of the recent unity deal between Hamas and this very same PA? Like many West Bank Palestinians I interviewed in recent weeks, both Abu Abdullah and his wife supported intra-Palestinian reconciliation, although like many interviewees they made cryptic comments regarding those "who benefit from lack of reconciliation," and who might have reason to break the deal.

Yet Abu Abdullah was skeptical that things would change. First, he said, the salaries of the Hamas public-sector workers in Gaza weren't paid. Moreover, he wanted to know, "if this was true reconciliation then why are the PA security forces still harassing its critics," such as Hamas leaders like Sheikh Hassan Yousef? Finally, security coordination between the PA and Israel -- something Hamas leaders had declared, implausibly, would be criminalized -- was still ongoing.

"The PA provides security for the settlements," Abu Abdullah said, "and the Palestinian people get...lots of money from abroad to cover the salaries of the PA security forces, instead of food for all Palestinians."

Despite the political exigency of a Hamas in crisis heeding Hassan Yousef's appeal for calm so as to mend ties with Fatah, Abu Abdullah was evidently well-versed on the reasons to remain wary of the reconciliation deal. The timing of the kidnapping may not have had the conscious goal of scuttling the deal and leading to a military confrontation with Israel, but it may well have led to both outcomes.

Whether Hamas's leadership sanctioned the abduction or not, the movement's current strategy seems to be to straddle the line between political integration and armed resistance. Just as Hassan Yousef's pragmatic statements held within them the implied threat of violence, so too did Abu Abdullah's outwardly pluralistic worldview contain the seeds of extremism.

Right before I left his home, Abu Abdullah declared, encouragingly, that all the monotheistic faiths -- Islam, Christianity, and Judaism -- shared the same God. "Our God," he added a moment later, rather less encouragingly, "will bring us victory."

Neri Zilber, a visiting scholar at The Washington Institute, is a journalist and researcher on Middle East politics and culture. ❖

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)