

# Sunni Hamas and Shiite Iran Form a Common Political Theology

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**F**or the last few months, a forty-three-page Arabic-language booklet has been emailed to Hamas activists in the Gaza Strip and to select members of the group in the West Bank and elsewhere. Titled *The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, this new publication represents the most important attempt to date to connect the growing cooperation between Hamas and its Iranian mentors to religious affinities, rather than political expediency. The argument, in essence, is that the Muslim Brotherhood -- with Hamas as its Palestinian branch -- is a natural partner of Iran, with which it shares a common set of values and a joint vision of the revival of the caliphate, despite the divide that historically separates Sunnis from Shiites and often sets them against each other.

Subtitled *The Dialectic of State and Nation in the Thought of the Imams al-Banna and Khomeini*, the booklet is not being sold openly in stores. The preface was written by Dr. Muhammad al-Hindi, the leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, who warns that "enemies of the nation" are trying to exploit the Sunni-Shiite rift in order to sabotage the struggle for an Islamic state. The booklet's author, sixty-year-old Dr. Ahmed Yousef, is a well-known movement leader who now holds the title of Foreign Ministry director-general in Gaza's Hamas government. Dr. Yousef lost his previous position as Prime Minister Ismail Haniyah's political advisor because his statements on the conditions for a hudna (ceasefire) with Israel were deemed too "soft" by others in the local command.

Yousef is widely recognized as one of the main spokesmen for the more moderate wing of Hamas. He was allowed to define "What Hamas Wants" in a New York Times op-ed in June 2007. And just a few months ago, he argued fiercely in an article that Hamas should pursue the political model of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, rather than becoming a Palestinian version of the Afghani Taliban. Furthermore, he hinted that Hamas would do well to reexamine its militarization. In private, Yousef has joked that others view him as "the American wing" of Hamas. Indeed, he received his doctorate in the United States and, for years, collaborated with Dr. Musa Abu-Marzuq -- deputy chairman of Hamas's political bureau -- in Fairfax County, Virginia, where he ran an Islamic think tank, the United Association for Study and Research, and edited the Middle East Affairs Journal.

It is, in fact, his reputation as a "moderate" that makes Yousef's recent contribution both interesting and meaningful. He explains that Hamas's dependence on Iran is not an accidental marriage of convenience, as is often claimed by

other movement leaders, but an inevitable partnership based on the common aspiration for the divine ideal of the "Islamic State." He accuses "Salafis and Wahhabis in the Gulf," as well as unnamed Gulf governments, of responsibility for the long periods of acute tension between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Republic over the years. In this way, he indicates that today, Iran's friendship is more important to Hamas than Saudi backing. Although Iran's support for the Asad regime in Syria, which crushed the Brotherhood's armed revolt there in 1982, added to their mutual animosity, Yousef argues that Iran and Hamas have an impressive track record of cooperation and a solid basis of similar, though not necessarily identical, religious convictions.

#### Yousef's Main Points

After the Ottoman Caliphate's abolition in 1924, writes Yousef, the two most significant events in modern Islamic history were the Muslim Brotherhood's establishment in Egypt by Sheikh Hasan al-Banna in 1928 and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. The Muslim Brotherhood is an international organization that aims to create an Islamic state; the Khomeinist movement has already created the first modern Islamic state, departing from traditional Shiite belief that an Islamic state must await the Mahdi's reappearance. Both al-Banna and Khomeini saw the Islamic state not as an end in itself, but as a tool to fulfill the message of the religion. Yousef concludes that "there is a wide common space between the two views that constitutes a solid foundation to regard Iran, the state, as a springboard toward the global Islamic state." Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's reservations concerning some aspects of the Iranian model -- for example, that only a Persian can become president -- Yousef advises overcoming those differences. "It is a great opportunity to implement the rules of the shariah . . . there is no escape from overcoming the conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites . . . these conflicts do not amount to a religious contradiction." Furthermore, Yousef advises the reader "not to see [these conflicts] as an impediment to establishing Islamic unity based on joint and agreed-upon foundations relating to the nature of the regime." On the differences between Sunnism and Shiism, he recommends "leaving aside issues of personal status and jurisprudence so that people can address them according to their particular doctrines."

According to Yousef, the lukewarm relations between Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood -- a product of fourteen centuries of Sunni-Shiite rivalry -- should, at the very least, regain their onetime warmth. Yousef traces the beginning of the interaction between the two to efforts by al-Azhar University in 1948 -- in which both al-Banna and Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Qomi took part -- to bridge the differences between Sunni and Shiite doctrines. He mentions that in 1954 the Muslim Brotherhood in both Cairo and Damascus welcomed Nawab Safawi, leader of the Iranian "Fedayeen-e-Islam," who was later executed by the shah. Yousef also reminds his audience of the contacts between al-Banna and Ayatollah Kashani, who supported the anti-West prime minister Muhammad Mossadegh in the early 1950s, to prove that an alliance was already beginning to form at that early stage. He points out that Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has himself translated the writings of Sayed Qutb -- an Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader eventually hanged by President Nasser -- from Arabic into Persian. Qutb is widely considered to be the spiritual father of modern jihadism, and his teachings enjoy special popularity among Hamas members. Yousef argues that the Muslim Brotherhood's relationship with Iran has suffered serious setbacks since the Brotherhood's initial support for the Islamic Revolution. Among the reasons he enumerates are the Iraq-Iran War, the Brotherhood's defeat in Syria, and Salafi propaganda against the Shiite "infidels" and Iran.

Yousef maintains that a new phase of bridge building has begun in recent years because Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood have similar positions on the Palestinian problem and reject any settlement with Israel. Both are also opposed to the U.S. military presence in the Middle East and support Muslim causes elsewhere, such as in Bosnia. Iran has toned down its sectarian Shiite rhetoric in order to emphasize its calls for Islamic unity, thus helping diffuse fears that it was seeking supremacy over other Muslims. Iran, as an Islamic republic, and the Muslim Brotherhood, by capturing power in Arab and Muslim Asian countries in the future, are both advancing the cause of "republics of

the Quran and the sultan."

## Conclusion

Hamas's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, is well known for its close ties with Iran. Now Yousef, one of the military wing's most outspoken critics, is trying to redefine Hamas's relationship with Iran as a strategic alliance rooted in a similar interpretation of contemporary political Islam. Hamas is seeking a religious justification for its dependence on the Islamic Republic, beyond the political requirements. Yousef, in fact, attempts to rewrite the history of Hamas-Iran relations over the last six decades so that partnership becomes a duty for true believers. No doubt Yousef had the blessing of others in Hamas's top echelon before he published his study -- a clear signal that the movement is rapidly distancing itself from the Saudis and other traditional benefactors in order to strengthen its pact with Iran. If so, we should not expect any shifts in the organization's positions on peace and the further strengthening of ties with Iran and its allies, Syria and Hizballah. Given its efforts to move closer to Iran, Hamas is very unlikely to make more than a mere pretense of reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority.

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