

# When Yemen Meets Gaza

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Articles & Testimony

**T**he Christmas Day pants bomber traveled a well-worn path to global terrorism: through Yemen. From the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in the Gulf of Aden, to the role key Yemenis played in the September 11 plot, to the increasingly prominent role of Yemen-based leaders of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf country has long been a terrorist hot-spot. Now, a small number of Yemeni jihadists have reportedly joined others from Syria, Egypt, France, and Belgium to fight a new war on an old battlefield: Gaza.

According to intelligence officials, up to a few dozen foreign fighters have entered Gaza from Yemen and other Middle Eastern and European countries. Some are experienced fighters there to provide training, while others seek to be trained and experience jihad. Some of the Europeans have even reportedly "come with their credit cards" and financed jihadist activities while in Gaza.

The influx is beginning to have an effect on what has traditionally been a local jihad. Groups such as Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade weave Palestinian nationalism and radical Islamism together but limit their operations to the Israeli-Palestinian front. Now, under the influence of more worldly jihadists, some Palestinian fighters are signing up for groups inspired by al Qaeda, fighting not for Palestine but for the whole Muslim umma.

Al Qaeda-inspired jihadist groups in Gaza have maintained a local operational focus on Israel and Gaza, but have tied their attacks to global issues like the Danish cartoon crisis or the incarceration of a jihadist ideologue in Britain. The fear among U.S. and Israeli intelligence is that such a "glocal" ideology is serving as a bridge between Palestinian nationalism and al Qaeda's global jihadist ideology. The former theoretically allows for a two-state solution; the latter requires adherents to wage violent jihad against all infidels and apostates until the creation of an Islamic state.

Hamas in Gaza -- by engaging in secular politics, failing to institute sharia law, and cracking down on fellow Palestinians who attack Israel or threaten its rule -- has created a vacuum that global jihadist groups, often populated by disgruntled Hamas operatives, have been keen to fill. Even so, membership in Gaza's global jihadist groups is estimated to be in the low hundreds. But while their capabilities are limited, they think big. In July 2008, Israeli intelligence successfully thwarted a plot against former British Prime Minister Tony Blair by one such group.

Jaish al-Islam is infamous for its involvement in the kidnappings of BBC reporter Alan Johnston in 2007. Jund Ansar Allah's activities came to the foreground in mid-August 2009, when security forces from the Hamas-run government in Gaza, together with members of Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades terrorist wing, raided a mosque affiliated with the group and engaged in protracted gun battles with its followers. The clashes, which left 24 people dead and 130 wounded, followed a Friday sermon by the extremist cleric Sheikh Abd al-Latif Musa condemning the Hamas government and announcing the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Palestine.

Since al Qaeda-inspired groups threaten Hamas's authority, it is no surprise that Hamas has cracked down on them. What is surprising is that such groups have failed so far to connect more formally with al Qaeda, given al Qaeda's recent antipathy to Hamas and its history of incorporating local conflicts into its global jihadist campaign.

Al Qaeda likely remains unconvinced of the ideological commitment of groups like Jaish al-Islam, whose leader, Mumtaz Dughmush, is better known for his criminal past than his religious zealotry. Al Qaeda may also have concerns about the survivability of such groups, and it may be waiting patiently for groups to establish themselves before accepting them into the fold of its global jihadist movement.

Some have argued that the existence of al Qaeda-inspired groups in Gaza means that Hamas is no longer the worst option and that Israel should engage with Hamas without preconditions, lest al Qaeda take over. In fact, the global jihadist groups in Gaza lack grassroots support and are in no position to challenge Hamas's authority as the governing entity, let alone take over the Gaza Strip. Moreover, Hamas remains at the heart of the problem. Despite Hamas's ideological differences with al Qaeda leaders and its violent crackdown on global jihadists in Gaza, its own radicalization has ironically created an ideal springboard for still more extreme radicalization. When one ideologically motivated suicide bomber becomes a role model, all ideologically motivated suicide bombers become role models.

The question now is how the meeting of Gazan radical Islamic extremism and the nihilistic ideology of global jihad will play out. Add the influx of a small number of capable foreign fighters, and one is left with a disturbing quandary: What happens when Yemen comes to Gaza?

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11). ❖

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