

Score One for ' Hamaswood '

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Articles & Testimony

Hamas, which recently created a production company and released its first major film production glorifying the life of a master terrorist, has scored its first major public relations coup. In a new article on the website of Foreign Affairs, Michael Bröning (director of the East Jerusalem office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) cites the group's recent downplaying of the relevance of its own charter as a telltale sign that Hamas is turning around or even "growing up." To be sure, the rhetoric of Hamas leaders has visibly changed in public statements. But in focusing on these statements alone, Bröning misses the real point: Hamas's words have changed, but their actions have not.

Hamas cannot be judged on the basis of its choice of vocabulary alone. Neither the relevance of each and every part of the Hamas charter (which Hamas leaders have expressly refused to revoke or update) nor the public statements of its leaders deserve as much weight as what the group actually does in judging whether or not it has truly evolved. The approach of solely examining what the group says, rather than what the group does -- the approach upon which Bröning has relied -- dangerously disregards Hamas's actions on the ground.

True, in recent interviews, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal has offered to cooperate with U.S. efforts to promote a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, indicated a willingness to implement an immediate and reciprocal ceasefire with Israel, and stated that the militant group would accept and respect a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. But the conciliatory tone of this hardline Hamas leader, who personally has been tied to acts of terrorism and is himself a U.S.-designated terrorist, is belied by the group's continued violent actions and radicalization on the ground, as well as the rise to prominence of violent extremist leaders within the group's local Shura (consultative) councils. Hamas's activities of late appear to be diametrically opposed to the thrust of Meshal's statements.

Continued terrorist activities. Despite talk of a ceasefire and pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hamas's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, continues to engage in terrorist activities. Shooting attacks are still common along the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip, including the firing of rocket-propelled grenades and mortar shells of the kind that rained on Israel just the other day. In late July, two Qassam Brigades operatives were killed in a "work accident" while placing explosives along the border fence near the al-Buraij refugee camp in central Gaza. A few days later, Israeli defense officials revealed that Hamas has been digging tunnels -- often used by the group to smuggle weapons and conduct kidnapping operations -- next to UN facilities, including one near a UN school in Bait Hanun that had recently collapsed. The placement of the tunnels near UN facilities was purportedly intended as a preventive measure against an Israeli attempt to destroy the tunnels.

Meanwhile, over the past several months, Palestinian security forces in the West Bank have seized at least \$8.5 million in cash from arrested Hamas members who plotted to kill Fatah-affiliated government officials. Palestinian officials reported that some of the accused had "recently purchased homes adjacent to government and military installations, mainly in the city of Nablus" for the purpose of observing the movements of government and security officials. Security forces also seized uniforms of several Palestinian security forces from the accused Hamas members.

Radicalizing Palestinian society. For Hamas, mutating the predominantly ethno-political Palestinian national struggle into a fundamentally religious conflict is critical to the group's ideology and its continued ability to inspire Palestinians to reject compromise or peaceful solutions to the conflict. Recently, Hamas embarked on a large public relations campaign using culture and the arts to glorify violence and demonize Israel. In a telling example, Hamas produced a feature-length film in 2009 that celebrated the life of Emad Akel, a leading Hamas terrorist who was killed by Israeli troops in 1993. Written by hardline Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar, Emad Akel was first screened in July 2009 at the Islamic University in Gaza City and described by Hamas interior minister in Gaza Fathi Hamad as the first production of "Hamaswood instead of Hollywood."

In addition, despite Meshal's statements, Hamas's continues its campaign of radicalization targeting Palestinian youth. This summer, more than 120,000 Palestinian children attended Hamas-run summer camps that focused not only on Islamic teachings, but also on "semi-military training with toy guns." Hamas campers recently staged a play reenacting the Gilad Shalit abduction before an audience that included Hamas officials such as Usama Mazini and Sheikh Ahmad Bahar.

Militants elected to leadership positions. Hamas's ongoing radical activities are particularly apparent in its willingness to place its most militant members in positions of power. This year, Hamas's local Shura councils held elections to determine who would move into leadership positions. Three local councils under the aegis of the Majlis al-Shura, the group's overarching political and decisionmaking body in Damascus, represent Gaza, the West Bank, and Hamas members in Israeli prisons. This last council completed a five-month-long election process in July 2009 that resulted in the appointment of Yahya al-Sinwar, described as the founder of a Hamas security agency who is serving a life sentence, as president of the prison Shura council. Many other Hamas operatives involved in terrorist activities were placed as council members, including:

- Abbas al-Sayyed, the mastermind of the March 2002 Park Hotel suicide bombing that killed 29 people and left 155 seriously wounded.
- Salah al-Arouri, a founder of the Qassam Brigades in the West Bank, who served as both a recruiter and commander for Hamas terrorist cells.
- Abd al-Khaliq al-Natsheh, Hamas's spokesman in Hebron, where he reportedly was the interlocutor between Hamas members who wanted to carry out suicide attacks and the leaders of Hamas terror cells within the Qassam Brigades.

In the August 2008 elections for Gaza's Shura council, for example, Hamas hardliners dominated as well.

As Hamas's activities on the ground make clear, the group's tactical flexibility cannot be mistaken for strategic change. Even in his recent interviews, Meshal was clear that Hamas has not rejected terrorism, but has put it on hold due to current circumstances. "Not targeting civilians," Meshal explained, "is part of an evaluation of the movement to serve the people's interests. Firing these rockets is a method and not the goal." In the context of discussing the sharp drop in Hamas rockets fired at Israeli civilian population centers, Meshal added, "The right to resist the occupation is a legitimate right, but practicing this right is decided by the leadership within the movement."

Even as Hamas advances a public-relations blitz for tactical gains, the group continues to advance its strategic goals through ongoing terrorist activities, robust radicalization, and the election of militant hardliners to leadership positions. Hamas's policies are evidenced not only by its words, but also by its deeds and actions. Michael Bröning had the right idea when he advised policymakers to "study recent Hamas policies and the movement's performance on the ground." If only he'd taken his own advice. ❖

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