

Political Hardball Within Hamas: Hardline Militants Calling Shots in Gaza

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Brief Analysis

On issues relevant to U.S. policy, there are no substantive divisions between the group's moderate and radical elements, only tactical differences.

Despite its myopic focus on promoting violent conflict rather than peaceful negotiations with Israel, Hamas is by no means a monolithic movement. Divisions within the Hamas leadership were evident, for instance, when the recent six-month ceasefire came to a close and varying Hamas leaders issued conflicting statements that both terminated the ceasefire and called for its extension. With Israeli forces currently deployed in Gaza targeting Hamas's military and political leadership, untangling the fissures within the organization is critically important to understanding the group's decisionmaking process.

Structure of Hamas

Hamas comprises three interrelated wings. The social welfare and political wings are the public faces of the group's social, administrative, political, and propaganda activities. The military wing is principally engaged in covert activities, such as executing suspected collaborators, surveilling potential targets, procuring weapons, and carrying out guerilla and terrorist attacks. Overseeing all Hamas activities is a Majlis al-Shura, or consultative council, which is the group's overarching political and decisionmaking body in Damascus. It includes representatives from Hamas elements in Gaza, the West Bank, Israeli prisons, and the external leadership based in Damascus. Under this Shura council are committees responsible for supervising a wide array of activities, from media relations to military operations. At the grassroots level in the West Bank and Gaza, local Shura committees answer to the overarching Shura council and carry out its decisions on the ground.

Traditional Fault Lines

Multiple fault lines run through Hamas. The external leadership is divided into two main groups: Gazans led by second-in-command Mousa Abu Marzouk and the so-called Kuwaidia group composed primarily of members

from the West Bank who have studied or worked in Kuwait, led by Khaled Mashal. The two factions work closely together, but Marzouk's faction resents the Kuwaiti group because of its tendency to dominate key positions within the Hamas political bureau. Other rifts include tensions between the group's internal leadership on the ground in the Palestinian territories and its external leadership in Damascus, between leaders in the West Bank and those in Gaza, and between religious Palestinian nationalists and radical Islamists.

These fissures were exacerbated by the assassinations of Shaikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdulaziz al-Rantissi in 2004, which left a gaping leadership hole in the Gaza Strip. While Mahmoud Zahar and Ismail Haniyah assumed leadership of the movement's political wing, several militant proteges of al-Rantissi aligned themselves with Muhammad Daif, the head of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades in Gaza. When Haniyah and others pledged to cease mortar attacks on Israel in response to complaints from local Palestinian businessmen frustrated by the damage of Israeli reprisal attacks, one of al-Rantissi's proteges, Shaikh Nizar Riyan -- who was killed in an Israeli airstrike last week -- openly challenged their public statements. Riyan paraded through the streets of the Jabalya refugee camp carrying weapons, and held a press conference at his mosque where four masked Qassam Brigade militants dismissed Haniyah's remarks, displayed a variety of weapons, handed out pamphlets documenting Hamas attacks, and announced that the group was developing Qassam rockets capable of reaching the Israeli city of Ashkelon.

The most significant fault line within Hamas is between those who prioritize the Palestinian national cause and those who prioritize the group's Islamist ideology. And while many "moderates" still support terror attacks under certain conditions, a current within the Hamas movement at times calls for a cessation of military activity to focus on Islamist political and social activity along the lines of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. According to one Israeli expert, a senior Hamas leader circulated an internal memorandum in October 2004 proposing Hamas give up its "secret underground apparatus" in the Gaza Strip. While many Hamas leaders in the West Bank reportedly supported the idea, it was rejected by its leaders in Gaza and by the senior political leadership outside the Palestinian territories.

Hardline Expansion in Gaza

More radical elements in Gaza reportedly followed instructions only from outside leaders like Mashal until Zahar and other hardliners took on more prominent roles. With its electoral victory in January 2006, and even more so after it defeated Fatah and forcibly took over Gaza in June 2007, the Damascus leadership lost some control to the group's Gaza leaders. While the Damascus leadership remained dominant, in large part because it still controlled the organization's purse strings and oversaw relationships with Hizballah, Iran, and other foreign entities, Hamas leaders in Gaza were making the day-to-day decisions. Although some hardline leaders such as Zahar and Said Siam lost their cabinet posts when Fatah and Hamas formed a short-lived national unity government in March 2007, their influence grew through their continued control over the movement's Executive Force and Qassam Brigades, unburdened by the responsibility of governance.

In August 2008, Hamas hardliners dominated the secret ballot election for Gaza's Shura council. Less-extreme Hamas leaders like Ghazi Hamad and Ahmad Yusuf reportedly did not even bother to run when they saw the electoral slate dominated by young Hamas members affiliated with the Qassam Brigades. The election reportedly brought hardline Hamas military officials into the movement's Gaza political bureau, and chief among them was Ahmed Jabari, Hamas's "chief of staff," who oversaw the group's military wing. This Hamas faction rejects "national dialogue" with Fatah, and sees such discussions as a means of removing Hamas from power and/or forcing it to compromise on its ideological commitment to confronting Israel through violence and rejecting a negotiated two-state solution. Within this political dynamic, solidified by the August Shura council vote, de facto Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyah is not believed to hold significant sway.

Ironically, splits within Hamas now appear to divide even the hardliners themselves. Palestinian Authority (PA)

officials in the West Bank reportedly seized internal Hamas correspondence in November 2008 in which Khaled Mashal, who personally supervised bombings and other attacks according to the U.S. government, heavily criticizes the Gaza leadership for undermining the Egyptian-mediated dialogue with Fatah. The letter suggests that Hamas leaders abroad and in the West Bank were trying to rein in the movement's Gaza leaders, who were seen as dictating hardline positions and dominating the movement's agenda.

Conclusion

Discussion of moderates and radicals almost invariably invites well-meaning efforts to engage with the former to further a split with the latter. In Hamas's case, this approach is counterproductive; on issues relevant to U.S. policy, there are no substantive divisions between the two groups, only tactical differences. And given the importance of strengthening the anti-Hamas PA, efforts to engage with any part of Hamas will ensure the erosion of confidence within the PA, further diminishing long-term prospects for real diplomatic progress.

The emergence of Gaza's hardline Hamas leadership, one that is closely affiliated with the movement's military wing, provides critical background to understanding recent events. It provides context not only for Hamas's decision to terminate the ceasefire and resume rocket attacks against Israeli civilian communities, but also for the Israeli decision to strike back hard -- first from the air and then on the ground -- at the group's military and political infrastructure in Gaza. It also clearly indicates that as the international community attempts to craft an enforceable ceasefire -- one that presumably protects Israeli civilians against indiscriminate Hamas rocket attacks -- a key prerequisite for success will be to weaken the militant Hamas leadership currently calling the shots in Gaza.

Matthew Levitt directs the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ❖

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