

Gaza:

The Next Terrorist Safe Haven?

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Jun 29, 2007

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Brief Analysis

Could Hamas members in the Gaza Strip join ranks with the global jihadist movement led by al-Qaeda? There is merit to this question, given the recent Hamas takeover of the territory and al-Qaeda's call for Muslims around the world to finance and arm Hamas. The interpersonal relationships between Hamas and al-Qaeda members present a significant danger. Although, as an organization, Hamas is not about to join al-Qaeda, individual Hamas members could (see Jake Lipton, "[The War of Words between Hamas and al-Qaeda](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2630)," PolicyWatch no. 1254 (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2630>)). Moreover, a lawless Gaza -- like Iraq's Anbar province, Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas, and Somalia -- could quickly become a safe haven for both homegrown and imported jihadists.

Already a Haven?

The State Department's most recent annual report on global terrorism developments, Country Reports on Terrorism 2006, highlighted the threat posed by "ungoverned, under-governed, or ill-governed areas of a country . . . where terrorists that constitute a threat to U.S. national security interests are able to organize, plan, raise funds, communicate, recruit, train, and operate in relative security because of inadequate governance capacity, political will, or both." By that definition, Gaza certainly constitutes a terrorist safe haven.

Now controlled by Hamas -- an organization that both Washington and the European Union have designated as a terrorist entity -- Gaza is home to operationally active cells of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Resistance Committees, as well as an array of small, amorphous militant groups such as the Army of Islam and the Sword of Islamic Justice. Small numbers of Hizballah operatives reportedly gained entry into the territory even before Hamas came to power, and Israeli authorities have reported communications between extremist networks there and in the Sinai Peninsula. Without proper control of entry points into Gaza -- including the border crossing with Egypt, the Mediterranean coastline, and the Rafah tunnel network -- there is no telling who or what could enter the territory under Hamas rule.

Hamas and al-Qaeda

Although it shares ideological roots and common tactics with many al-Qaeda-affiliated groups that grew out of the

Muslim Brotherhood (including suicide attacks against civilians), Hamas sees itself as a "legitimate" resistance organization. As a group, it is unlikely to give up its virtual jihad against Israel and secular Palestinians in favor of al-Qaeda's all-out jihad against the West. Nevertheless, connections between the two organizations do exist.

According to a January 2001 National Security Council memorandum, al-Qaeda had "recently increased its contacts with the Palestinian rejectionist groups, including Hizbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad." These relationships are to be expected, since many of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated front organizations that finance al-Qaeda also fund Hamas. In 2003, National Security Council terrorism czar Richard Clarke testified that "al-Qaeda is a small part of the overall challenge we face from radical terrorist groups associated with Islam. Autonomous cells, regional affiliate groups, radical Palestinian organizations, and groups sponsored by Iran's Revolutionary Guards are engaged in mutual support arrangements, including funding."

To be sure, Hamas activists maintain financial, logistical, and even operational links to a wide array of international terrorist groups. As early as 1995, Hamas members participated in the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress in Sudan, where they met Osama bin Laden and representatives of Algerian, Pakistani, Tunisian, and other terrorist groups. A few years later, the leader of one Pakistani militant organization openly admitted in an interview that his group had "person-to-person contact" with other groups, adding, "Sometimes fighters from Hamas and Hizbollah help us." Asked where such contact takes place, he answered, "A good place to meet is in Iran."

Palestinians in the Global Jihad

Early in his career, Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian militant and cofounder of al-Qaeda, coordinated attacks on Israeli targets from Jordan. Only later did he move to Afghanistan and become a leading figure in the jihad against the Soviet Union and the formation of the international jihad support network that would later morph into al-Qaeda. Hamas members see their jihadist ideology as a direct outgrowth of Azzam's. Many radicalized Palestinians have made the same leap Azzam did from local jihad against Israel to global jihad against the "head of the snake": the United States and other countries seen as supporting Israel. There are many Palestinians in positions of authority within al-Qaeda, and individual relationships between al-Qaeda and Hamas operatives are common. As the Pakistani militant cited above noted, these sorts of interpersonal relationships between terrorists "don't involve other organizations, just individuals."

Former Hamas members have gravitated toward al-Qaeda as well. According to the FBI, al-Qaeda has actively sought to lure Hamas operatives into its global jihad. In a 2004 search warrant affidavit filed in a Hamas case, the bureau noted that the post-September 11 crackdown on al-Qaeda spurred the organization to place "renewed emphasis" on finding "confirmed jihadist supporters in the United States by trying to enlist proven members of other groups such as Hamas to make up for the vacuum on the field level."

According to FBI director Robert Mueller, the bureau is concerned "about the possibility that individuals who are members of groups previously considered to be peripheral to the current threat, could be convinced by more radical, external influences to take on facilitation or even worse -- an operational role -- with little or no warning." Israeli officials are similarly worried about Palestinian radicals striking U.S. or Israeli targets abroad: "The biggest concern," one official explained, "is about rogue cells and Hamas individuals close to al-Qaeda carrying out attacks on their own." Several factors loom large in the Israeli analysis, but none more than the radicalization campaign overseen by Hamas's social services network. Angry, frustrated Palestinians -- who regularly listen to mosque sermons depicting Israelis and Americans as enemies of Islam and Palestine -- are increasingly susceptible to global jihadist ideology.

Al-Qaeda in the Palestinian Territories

In the past, al-Qaeda has recruited Palestinians and sought to infiltrate operatives into the West Bank and Gaza,

suggesting that global jihadist elements would jump at the opportunity to use Hamas-controlled Gaza as a safe haven. Consider the case of Nabil Awqil, who was recruited for al-Qaeda training by a fellow Palestinian while studying in Pakistan. In 1998, after graduating from al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, Awqil returned to Gaza to conduct operations against Israeli targets. Similarly, in September 2005, Israeli prosecutors charged another Palestinian, Mahmoud Waridat, with undergoing training in small arms and bombmaking at al-Qaeda's al-Farouq camp in Afghanistan in 2001. Waridat reportedly declined to join al-Qaeda following the training, preferring to put his skills to use in his native West Bank.

According to the Treasury Department, in 2001, al-Qaeda-linked militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi "received more than \$35,000 for work in Palestine. Zarqawi planned to use the money to bring more Jordanian and Palestinian mujahedin to his camp in Herat, to purchase passports, and to facilitate travel to Lebanon. He received assurances that further financing would be provided for attacks against Israel. In early 2002, Zarqawi was reported to have found a way into Palestine." His network laid plans "to smuggle operatives into Israel to conduct operations. In addition to being tasked with finding a mechanism that would enable more suicide martyrs to enter Israel, these operatives were also sent to provide training on explosives, poisons, and remote controlled devices." Similarly, according to the head of Israeli military intelligence, al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri had dispatched dozens to hundreds of trained al-Qaeda members to areas bordering Israel as of January 2007.

Conclusion

Hamas's Gaza coup raises many concerns. The prospect of individual Palestinians becoming increasingly attracted to global jihadist ideology, and of foreign jihadists potentially entering Gaza, presents policymakers with genuine challenges. There are no quick fixes to counter these threats, but a good starting point would be for border states to secure all points of entry into Gaza to prevent it from becoming the next terrorist safe haven.

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