

The War of Words between Hamas and al-Qaeda

Jun 28, 2007



Brief Analysis

On June 14, Hamas evicted Fatah security forces from the Gaza Strip, establishing full control over the territory. Eleven days later, al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri issued a statement calling on Muslims to support Hamas fighters -- the latest in an ongoing, public dialogue in which al-Qaeda and Hamas leaders have alternatively decried and praised each other's organizations. An analysis of this public exchange reveals that al-Qaeda is uncomfortable with Hamas leaders even as it fully supports the movement's militants.

For al-Qaeda, any semblance of cooperation with moderate Muslims or "those trying to liberate the land of Islam through elections" is anathema. Consequently, despite initial support for Hamas's electoral gains, al-Qaeda has supported the organization's leaders only to the extent that they reject Fatah and the political process. Likewise, the more Hamas is willing to resort to armed force to accomplish its goals, the more vocal support it can expect from al-Qaeda. In light of these factors, the public debate between the two organizations -- carried out via numerous media outlets, official organizational releases, and other public statements -- has unfolded in four stages since March 2006.

Watching and Waiting

In January 2006, Hamas scored major victories in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections. A month after the group assumed power, al-Zawahiri issued a statement seeming to welcome the victory and strongly criticizing the Palestinian Authority:

- March 4 -- Al-Zawahiri called on "my brothers in Hamas to fight on and not to accept agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel," but warned that "reaching power is not a goal by itself . . . and no Palestinian has the right to give away a grain of the soil. The seculars in the Palestinian Authority have sold out Palestine for crumbs. . . . Giving them legitimacy is against Islam." Hamas spokesman Osama Hamdan responded: "We want . . . something more than advice. We call on the [Muslim] nation to take our side. . . . But for some people to think that Hamas is waging a political battle and might abandon resistance or concede parts of Palestine because it is forming the government -- well, no such thing is on our agenda."

- March 10 -- Hamas leader Khaled Mashal stated that the group "acts on its soil against the Israeli occupier and does not have any operations outside Palestine. The world must be able to make a clear distinction between us and al-Qaeda."

Clear Warnings

On June 8, 2006, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas called for a national referendum on an initiative regarding a unified Palestinian state and implicit recognition of Israel. Throughout the rest of the year, news reports of a rumored Fatah-Hamas unity government circulated amid ongoing negotiations between the two sides, with al-Zawahiri repeatedly warning Hamas not to cooperate with secular forces.

- June 9 -- Al-Zawahiri urged "Muslims to reject any referendum on Palestine [that] calls for recognizing the Zionist entity." Hamdan responded: "I consider this call as advice to the Palestinians. This call might indicate the whole [Muslim] nation's dedication to the Palestinian cause and people."

- December 20 -- Al-Zawahiri harshly condemned Hamas for participating in the January 2006 elections: "How come they did not demand an Islamic constitution for Palestine before entering any elections? Are they not an Islamic movement? . . . Accepting the legitimacy of Mahmoud Abbas . . . is an abyss that will ultimately lead to eliminating the jihad and recognizing Israel." In response, Mashal stated that he wished to avoid a "polemic" with al-Zawahiri and that "Palestinians always retain the option of resistance."

- December 31 -- Al-Zawahiri urges Islamists in Palestine not to cooperate with Fatah in a unity government: "The Palestine-selling secularist traitors cannot possibly be your brothers, so neither confer on them legitimacy . . . nor participate with them in their sharia-rejecting assemblies."

Angry Condemnation

On February 8, 2007, Hamas and Fatah signed the Mecca accord instituting a national unity government. Al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda leaders unequivocally condemned the deal.

- March 11 -- Al-Zawahiri stated: "The Hamas leadership has finally joined the surrender train of [former Egyptian president Anwar] Sadat for humiliation and capitulation. . . . Hamas went to a picnic with the U.S. Satan and his Saudi agent. . . . What kind of government is this that does not have control over entry or exit, and over movement between its two parts, without a permit from Israel?" Hamdan responded: "We do not accept [criticism] from those who do not know what is going on and are not aware of the details, because then this testimony will be incomplete and [un]credible." Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum added: "These are unjust accusations without consequences for the policies of Hamas, which knows how to read the international and regional situation. . . . Maybe these are personal interpretations of Ayman al-Zawahiri, but we would have liked to see the Muslim and Arab nations stand together behind the Palestinian people."

Mashal responded as well: "Hamas develops and adopts a balanced and flexible response, but this response is based on a specific path and vision and not on illusions. . . . We are not sensitive to the accusations you [al-Zawahiri] have mentioned. . . . There is no problem if one is reassured about his own ideas, especially Hamas."

- April 29 -- In a video posted on the internet, al-Qaeda figure Abu Yahya al-Libi stated: "Where is revenge, where are the bombs, where is the fire? . . . Those listening to your statements can no longer differentiate between you and secular groups. . . . They [Hamas] betrayed the dreams of their young fighters and they stabbed them in the back."

- May 6 -- Al-Zawahiri asserted: "If [Hamas] is given a choice between abandoning government and abandoning Palestine, it should abstain from government, hold on to Palestine, and choose jihad and resistance instead of a third of the seats in the municipal council of Gaza and Ramallah. . . . However, the culture of concession and methodology of backtracking bore their evil fruits, and Hamas's leadership agreed to participate in the aggression against the rights of the Muslim umma in Palestine." Hamdan responded: "This charge is rejected. However, I emphasize that the talk of al-Zawahiri and others giving advice to Hamas is a proof [of] the movement's standing and what it constitutes for the Islamic world and for this umma. . . . This talk was due to a lack of information, and because the stance was not evaluated properly. We don't accept accusations. However, we do accept advice."

Support for Hamas Fighters

Following the June 22 announcement of Hamas's Gaza takeover, al-Zawahiri proclaimed strong support for the organization's fighters but remained wary of the leadership's political designs.

- June 25 -- Al-Zawahiri stated: "Today we must support the mujahedin in Palestine, including the Hamas mujahedin, despite all the mistakes made by their leadership. . . . We tell our brothers, the Hamas mujahedin, that we and the entire Muslim nation stand alongside you, but you must redress your [political] path. . . . Muslims must join Hamas ranks . . . and we will back them by facilitating the passage of weapons and supplies from neighboring

countries." Hamas spokesman Ghazi Hamad responded: "We are an independent movement, and we do not take orders from anyone. Al-Zawahiri is always blundering in his stance. At times he considers Hamas to be dead, and at others he calls for supporting Hamas. We do not take orders from al-Qaeda or any other organization." Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zahar added, "Brother al-Zawahiri and [al-Qaeda] do not seem to know the real conditions of Hamas. . . . We are grownups and can run this battle in the interest of our people."

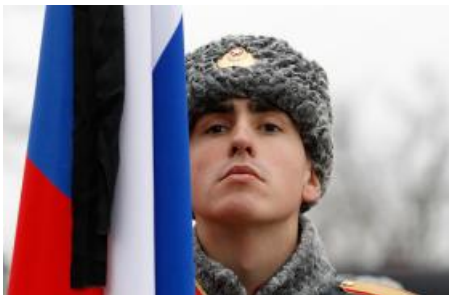
Conclusion

Unlike Hamas, which depends on a concentrated local constituency for direct support, al-Qaeda commands a more global and amorphous constituency. Al-Qaeda's rhetoric, unbounded by domestic political concerns, appeals to a larger and more diverse audience -- including radicalized Palestinians. Yet al-Zawahiri's statements are also precisely targeted, with consistent condemnation of Hamas leaders and praise of Hamas militants. This strategy may indicate that al-Qaeda views Gaza as a promising sanctuary for support and future operations -- and the "Hamas mujahedin" (and their vast tunnel smuggling network) as the pathway to establishing a foothold there.

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