

Teaching Terror:

How Hamas Radicalizes Palestinian Society

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On February 12, 2007, Matthew Levitt participated in a panel discussion on the topic of environments that enable terrorism at a conference titled, "The Roots of Terror: Understanding the Evolving Threat of Global Terrorism," sponsored by Women in International Security and the U.S. Army War College. This is the prepared text of his remarks.

If Hamas has one supreme objective, it is to mutate the essentially ethno-political Palestinian national struggle into a fundamentally religious conflict. Accomplishing this goal entails transforming Palestinian society -- a relatively secular culture, compared to other Muslim societies in the Arab world -- into one that is religiously zealous and politically extreme. Such a project of radicalization is the goal of all violent Islamist groups, from al-Qaeda to Egyptian Islamic Jihad. But Hamas, operating a grassroots campaign in a limited geographical area, is able to execute a strategically planned radicalization campaign that translates existing social preconditions - Israeli occupation, military checkpoints, lack of Palestinian leadership, lawlessness - into an active, violent, and radical response.

One study of Palestinian suicide bombers reveals the critical role played by the Hamas dawa - Hamas's social-welfare infrastructure of clinics, schools, mosques and charities - in pushing angry and frustrated Palestinians to the point of committing acts of terrorism. While they acknowledge that no single psychological profile describes the wide variety of Palestinian suicide bombers, the researchers developed a series of prototypical categories that combine both clinical and social psychological causes. A telling corollary to their primary findings, however, is that whatever the typology of the potential terrorist, each requires "a social environment that is supportive of such an attack; media that disseminates the information among the supportive population; spiritual leadership that encourages such attacks; and financial and social assistance for families of suicide terrorists after their death." Together, these conditions create a comprehensive social environment - a culture of radicalization - within Palestinian society."

Social preconditions by themselves do not make a suicide bomber. While poverty, humiliation, personal suffering, shame, or loss of a loved one can all be powerful radicalizing factors, they traditionally require an established terrorist organization to channel that anger and frustration into a desire to kill and maim random civilians (as opposed, for example, to a desire simply to kill oneself). Increasingly, the internet now fulfills some of these functions, but Hamas's grassroots radicalization campaign on-the-ground is personal, eye-to-eye, and second to

none.

What are the goals of Hamas's radicalization campaign, and what are the methods by which this radicalization is achieved?

The goals of Hamas's radicalization efforts include building grassroots support for the Islamist agenda; affecting hard-to-reach populations; undermining moderate Palestinian leaders; and purchasing goodwill toward Hamas - and logistical support for its operatives - by promoting financial dependency.

Hamas charitable and humanitarian organizations not only fund the families of Hamas suicide bombers, they finance important health, education, and welfare projects that are badly needed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Projects like these play a critical role in building sympathy and support for the group among the local population. Hamas humanitarian projects are usually couched in Islamist terms and are designed to build grassroots support for its religious agenda.

For example, the Treasury Department revealed that Sanabil, a since-defunct Hamas front organization in Lebanon, increased its influence in Palestinian refugee camps there by first providing basic necessities to needy families and only later requiring these families to fill out application forms noting whether they had ever worked with Hamas.

For a terrorist organization to have Hamas's spectacular success and influence, it needs to convert to its cause not only disaffected young men, but also children, women, and entire families. These groups are less likely to be attracted by the charms of a street militia, but they are easily reached -- and radicalized -- by the social services network.

In the Islamist society idealized by Hamas, the martyr is the most revered citizen; Palestinian children who are caught up in the Hamas dawa are taught to recognize the virtue of death-for-Allah. Once indoctrinated into this belief system, they are more easily exploited as grade-school terrorists. A 2004 Israel Security Agency (ISA) report identified a 64 percent increase in the number of minors involved in terrorism compared to 2003. Gaza psychologist Fadl Abu Hein has lamented, "Martyrdom has become an ambition for our children. If they had a proper education in a normal environment, they won't have looked for a value in death."

Hamas also seeks to equate in the minds of Palestinian parents familial "nurturing" with nursing hatred. In an interview with National Geographic, a suicide bomber's mother admitted that it was she who instilled in her son the desire for martyrdom and "brought them [her sons] up to become martyrs, to be martyrs for the name of Allah." Her "martyred" son Muhammad's old bedroom was adorned with posters of martyred Palestinians and featured a photo of Muhammad on the computer screensaver. The mother, Miriam Farhat, was elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council on the Hamas ticket in January 2006.

The vast majority of moderate Palestinian leaders does not share Hamas's Islamist orientation -- and therefore must be supplanted in order for Hamas's vision of Palestinian society to be realized. The dawa is the most successful tool at Hamas's disposal to undermine moderate Palestinian leaders. A Palestinian report submitted to PA chairman Yasser Arafat in June 2000 described a meeting in Damascus at which Iranian officials and Hamas leaders agreed "to use the dawa in the battle for public opinion." But it was much earlier, during a 1993 Hamas meeting in Philadelphia, where Hamas fundraisers decided that "most or almost all" funds collected from that point on "should be directed to enhance the Islamic Resistance Movement [Hamas] and to weaken the self-rule government [Palestinian Authority]."

Those who benefit from Hamas largesse support the organization and, frequently, actively facilitate the group's attacks. In the words of an Israeli defense official, "In the territories, there are no free lunches: those who receive help from the Islamic associations pay with support for Hamas." Indeed, Mohammad Anati, the head of the Holy Land Foundation office near Jerusalem, acknowledged to criminal investigators that providing services promotes Hamas interests and earns the support of those who benefit from Hamas aid. To be sure, Hamas social welfare

support is largely determined by a cold cost-benefit analysis that links the amount of aid awarded to the support it will buy.

What are the methods by which Hamas radicalizes Palestinian society?

The process of becoming an adherent of radical Islam is fundamentally a didactic process, as is the indoctrination to any ideology -- whether political, philosophical, or religious. From a very young age, Palestinians who participate in the Hamas dawa, both as agents and subjects, are instructed in the language of radical Islam, schooled in its rationalizations and apologies, and taught its supreme virtue and boundless promise. Such an education program requires the student to be constantly supervised, mentored, cajoled, threatened, and praised. No wonder, then, that Hamas invests so heavily in schools, campuses and mosques - controlled environments where impressionable minds are formed and where people go for answers and hope.

In 2001, the Islamic Society in Gaza held a graduation ceremony for the 1,650 children who attend its forty-one kindergartens. Photographs of the graduation ceremony show preschool age children wearing military uniforms and carrying mock rifles; a five-year-old girl dips her hands in red paint to mimic the bloodied hands Palestinians proudly displayed after the lynching of two Israelis in Ramallah; another child is dressed as Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yasin and surrounded by other children costumed as suicide bombers.

The radicalization campaign continues through the course of a Palestinian student's academic career, employing materials produced and distributed by the dawa. The Hamas Islamic Student Movement in the Bethlehem area distributed to young students so-called "Instruction Cards," bearing the pictures of Hamas suicide bombers and others killed carrying out terrorist attacks, and encouraging Palestinian youth to follow in their footsteps.

In addition to schools, Hamas dawa organizations run summer camps at which Palestinian children are saturated with the group's propaganda and even given semi-military training. Combining childhood recreation with radical indoctrination, the camp environment exposes children to both active programming in the form of classes on radical Islam and passive indoctrination through the pervasive images of suicide bombers plastered on walls throughout the camp. According to Hamas's Sheikh Bahar, summer camps are especially successful for indoctrinating religious and secular youth alike. Bahar explained that teaching children the history of Islam while they are surrounded by pictures of martyrs instills "seeds of hate against Israel."

Radicalization of Palestinian youth is no less prominent at Palestinian institutions of higher learning. Hamas propaganda -- pamphlets, posters and myriad other printed collateral -- literally litter Palestinian university campuses. For example, a timetable for university lectures at one campus featured pictures of Hamas suicide bombers. During student elections at Bir Zeit University in 2003, Hamas candidates reenacted suicide bombings by blowing up models of Israeli buses. In one Bir Zeit campus debate, a Hamas candidate taunted his Fatah challenger by boasting, "Hamas activists in this University killed 135 Zionists. How many did Fatah activists from Bir Zeit kill?"

With an estimated 11,000 students enrolled during the 2004-2005 school year, al-Najah University in the West Bank city of Nablus is the largest university in the Palestinian territories. The terrorist recruitment, indoctrination and radicalization of students for which al-Najah is known typically take place via various student groups. By far the most prominent of these student associations is the Hamas-affiliated Kutla Islamiya, or Islamic Bloc. Of the thirteen members of al-Najah's 2004 student council, eight -- including the chairperson -- belong to Hamas's Islamic Bloc. Some of the most notorious Hamas terrorists have held senior positions in the al-Najah faction, including Qais Adwan, a former Islamic Bloc leader and head of the al-Najah student council, who was also the head of the Qassam Brigades in the northern West Bank.

Mosques controlled by Hamas members and supporters serve as the nerve center for the group's activities - political, charitable and military all.

Examples of mosques that function as radical soapboxes are commonplace. But in addition to the radical rhetoric issuing from the pulpits, mosques run by Hamas members and sympathizers are often a bulletin board of propaganda, their walls plastered with posters and pamphlets glorifying suicide bombers and jailed Hamas militants. For example, Israeli forces raiding the al-Ein mosque in al-Bireh in September 2003 found posters of suicide bombers on the mosque's front door as well as on walls and notice boards throughout the mosque. More surprising, soldiers also seized leaflets and other Hamas propaganda calling for "many spectacular suicide bombing attacks" against U.S. forces in Iraq.

Religious study groups held at Hamas-affiliated mosques -- including Jerusalem's al Aqsa mosque -- have also been identified as sources of recruitment and radicalization. Known as an usra (literally, "family"), such a group is typically led by a teacher (emir) who is a Hamas member or sympathizer, and therefore in a unique position to identify members responsive to radical and Islamist messages.

Increasingly, compliments its on-the-ground radicalization efforts with a parallel campaign on the internet.

Hamas publishes a weekly online children's magazine -- just one of approximately 20 Internet sites the group produces -- called al-Fateh (The Conqueror). Launched in September 2002, the site links to other Hamas websites and runs benign children's stories alongside articles preaching the value of carrying out acts of terror -- casting suicide bombers as ideal role models for young children, and encouraging hatred of Israel and Jews. Issue 38, for example, featured a photograph of the decapitated head of Zaynab Abu Salem, a female suicide bomber from the al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (not Hamas) who detonated her suicide bomb belt on September 22, 2004, at the French Hill intersection in Jerusalem, killing two and wounding seventeen. Interestingly, the fact that Salem was not a Hamas member did not preclude members of the media committee from using her severed head to desensitize Palestinian youth to acts of violence.

Al-Fateh is only one of many Hamas websites, which typically feature statements and interviews with the group's leaders, martyr photo galleries, video clips of soon-to-be martyrs giving their "living wills," as well as articles, posters and photographs demonizing Israel and glorifying suicide bombers.

Hamas also uses the Internet to recruit new supporters and members. While some Hamas recruitment efforts are active and tangible, such as spotting potential recruits at mosques and religious classes, the Internet enables terrorist groups to conduct a virtual recruitment drive that, while passive and intangible, has the capacity to reach out to a far larger audience -- one that can be reached at any time of day, in any weather, under any conditions (i.e., even when neighborhoods are under curfew or closure), and anywhere -- not just the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but the world entire. To this end, Hamas operates websites in Arabic, English, Russian, French, Farsi (Persian), Urdu, and Malay, which are run off servers in the United States, Russia, Ukraine, and Indonesia.

Through an impressive combination of all these means -- including secular and religious institutions, grassroots activism and globalized media -- Hamas successfully radicalizes Palestinians not only to support and fund but to facilitate and participate in the group's terrorist attacks. And the fact that Hamas, an organization that prides itself on being a local "resistance" organization, targets foreign audiences from America to Malaysia with its web-based messages should not surprise: the vast majority of Hamas's operating budget is raised abroad.

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