

Al-Qaeda Infiltration of Gaza: A Post-Disengagement Assessment

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Brief Analysis

Read (<http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=20683>) an interview with David Keyes in Frontpagemag.com on the topic of al-Qaeda infiltration of Gaza.

Since the U.S.-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, al-Qaeda has responded by splintering into affiliate groups that work along the same lines as the parent group but have a wider degree of organizational latitude. One of the newest may be taking shape in Gaza. The Israeli Ministry of Defense recently reported that al-Qaeda members had crossed from Egypt into the Gaza Strip after Israel's withdrawal from the territory. If al-Qaeda gains a foothold in Gaza, it would be a most disturbing development not only for the Arab-Israeli peace process, but for America's counterterrorism efforts as well.

Historical Context

Prior to Israel's August 2005 disengagement from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank, some security experts predicted that al-Qaeda would attempt to infiltrate the evacuated areas soon thereafter. This would follow the historical pattern in which al-Qaeda has sought security vacuums from which to operate -- from Afghanistan in the 1980s to Somalia in the 1990s to the Waziristan provinces near the Pakistani border today. This fear was compounded by the realization that a perceived victory in Gaza for Islamists might propel terrorism and extremist ideologies to new levels. Have predictions of al-Qaeda infiltration of Gaza proven correct?

Opportunity for Entry to Gaza

Part of Israel's disengagement plan included the withdrawal of all IDF presence from the Philadelphia route along the Egyptian-Gaza border. Control of this sensitive frontier was handed over to Egyptian and Palestinian security personnel. But in the immediate aftermath of the transfer, huge numbers of people streamed into and out of Gaza with no supervision, control, or authorization. Large amounts of weapons and ammunition were reportedly smuggled across the border. Given that al-Qaeda activity has been uncovered in the Egyptian Sinai, there is a strong likelihood that al-Qaeda members may have sought to exploit the security vacuum along the Gaza-Egypt frontier in search of a new, more hospitable operating environment. Whatever faults the Egyptian security apparatus may suffer, it is committed to fighting all terrorist activity within its borders, because such activity poses a clear and present danger to Egyptian security. A similar assessment cannot be made of Palestinian security efforts.

Israeli and Palestinian Evidence of Al-Qaeda in Gaza

In the past, some Palestinian officials took great offense at even the mildest suggestion that al-Qaeda may have taken root in the West Bank or Gaza. In 2002, for example, Yasser Arafat flatly denied the claim of al-Qaeda infiltration, stating that it was a "big, big, big, big lie to cover Sharon's attacks and his crimes against our people." Yasser Abed Rabbo, a former Palestinian information minister, said, "There are certain elements who were instructed by the Mossad to form a cell under the name of al-Qaeda in the Gaza Strip in order to justify the assault and the military campaigns of the Israeli occupation army against Gaza."

Despite these outlandish charges, there now appears to be substantial evidence that al-Qaeda has acquired a limited but growing presence in Gaza. This presence seems to have increased since disengagement:

- In October 2005, the head of Israeli military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aharon Zeevi-Farkash, stated that al-Qaeda's interest in Israel was growing. "Look at the circle that is tightening around us. Attacks in Turkey, Taba, Sharm al-Shaykh, Katyushas in Jordan. We know that activists from the global jihad, about ten, infiltrated Gaza from Sinai during the story we had with Philadelphia. They will link up with those who are in the uprising in Gaza. It is a real threat."
- Retired Brig. Gen. Danny Arditi, who heads the counterterrorism department of the Israeli National Security Council, confirmed to Israeli Army Radio that al-Qaeda had infiltrated Gaza from the southern Egyptian border after disengagement. "The breaching of border along the Philadelphia Corridor has allowed activists from al-Qaeda and world jihad agents into the Gaza Strip," he said.
- The Shin Bet has been investigating the Jihad Brigade, a suspected al-Qaeda affiliate in Gaza. Citing an infrastructure of al-Qaeda-linked groups in Sinai, Shin Bet director Yuval Diskin also expressed concern that they would infiltrate the Gaza border.

The claim of al-Qaeda influence in Gaza is not limited to Israeli sources. Palestinians have spoken about a rise in al-Qaeda presence in the territories:

- In a September 2005 interview, leading Hamas spokesman Mahmoud az-Zahar confirmed the infiltration of al-Qaeda members into Gaza. In addition to physical infiltration, he said that telephone contact from Gaza with other al-Qaeda centers in foreign countries existed as well.
- Palestinian Authority security forces told the Jerusalem Post that a new al-Qaeda group called Jundallah ("Allah's Brigades") had become active in Gaza, operating mostly out of southern Gaza. This group consists primarily of Hamas and Islamic Jihad members who feel that their organizations have become too moderate.
- In May 2005, Jundallah perpetrated its first attack against Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers in Rafah. Abu Abdallah al-Khattab, a spokesman for the group, warned of future attacks against America. "Soon everyone will see operations [against the U.S.] that would make all the Muslims delighted," he said.
- Immediately prior to disengagement, three masked gunmen claimed responsibility on behalf of al-Qaeda members in Gaza for a series of rocket attacks at Israeli settlements.
- Leaflets in Khan Yunis distributed by al-Qaeda's "Palestine branch" proclaimed that the terrorist group has started its work of uniting Muslims under an Islamic state. The group stated that their primary goal was enforcing sharia law worldwide. The leaflets were signed by al-Qaeda of Jihad in Palestine.

Policy Implications

The arrival of al-Qaeda operatives in Gaza has the potential to worsen an already problematic security situation. Even before Israeli disengagement, there were signs of al-Qaeda's cooperation with the local radical Islamist organization, Hamas. Ideologically, the two groups often cite the same few Saudi sheikhs to justify their terrorism. Operationally, there are links, too. In 2003, Hamas terrorists were arrested by Israeli forces after returning from an al-Qaeda training facility in Afghanistan. That same year, according to former IDF chief of staff Lt. Gen Moshe Yaalon, two al-Qaeda operatives were recruited into Hamas in order to execute the suicide bombing at the Mike's Place cafe in Tel Aviv. Both men, Mohammed Hanif and Omar Sharif, were British citizens of Pakistani descent. Because al-Qaeda is scattered and weak, it needs all the assistance it can get; ties between al-Qaeda and Hamas may strengthen in coming years.

Though al-Qaeda in Gaza currently may have only a limited numerical presence, preventing it from gaining a real

foothold needs to be an important counterterrorism priority of all interested parties. This includes the Palestinians, first and foremost, as well as Egypt, Israel, the United States, and other regional and international actors. If there is one thing the already combustible Arab-Israeli arena does not need, it is the addition of a strong al-Qaeda operating from the Palestinian territories.

David Keyes is a former research intern at The Washington Institute.

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