

Hamas and Islamic Jihad Clash over 'Media Jihad'

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Articles & Testimony

Matthew Levitt assesses the public perception of and popular support for militant Palestinian organisations. Traditionally, the relationship between Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) has vacillated between tense rivalry and close cooperation. Over the past four years, however, the two groups cooperated closely with each other -- and with other Palestinian groups -- to the point that they discussed merging the Qassam and Al Quds brigades, Hamas and Islamic Jihad's respective military wings.

Despite this recent history of intimate cooperation, a sharp rift has now developed between Hamas and Islamic Jihad that threatens further confrontation and could undermine Palestinian efforts to restore calm and the rule of law in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Around October 2004, several dozen Hamas activists responsible for promoting the group in the media met in what they believed was a closed forum. In fact, the meeting was videotaped and, according to a copy of the tape obtained by the Israeli daily Haaretz, Hamas Shura Council member Fathi Hamad -- in charge of the group's communications system in Gaza -- disparaged Islamic Jihad for its intimate ties to Shi'a Hizbullah and Iran. He complained bitterly to the group about Islamic Jihad's propaganda dominance, its success at infiltrating the media and its control of "the agenda". [1]

History of competition and cooperation

Islamic Jihad and Hamas were fierce rivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely a result of ideological differences relating to Islamic Jihad's affinity for -- and Hamas' rejection of -- Iranian Khomeinism and the principle of waliyat al faqih, that is, rule by the jurispudent (entrusting governance to clerics). Moreover, while both groups grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Jihad marginalised the role of social activity in favour of militant activity, while Hamas gave prominence to social welfare activity and proselytising (dawa), even as it too engaged in a simultaneous terror campaign.

After the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, however, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad joined the Damascus-based Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF) and -- for the most part -- set aside their differences. By 1995, Hamas joined Islamic Jihad in establishing its operational headquarters in Damascus (its political office was then still in Amman) and, at the behest of Iran and facilitation of Hizbullah, the two groups coordinated their terrorist activities.

Competition between the groups largely arose over issues such as Islamic Jihad's perceived infringement on Hamas' social welfare turf or on Hamas reaching out to radicalised Israeli Arabs (which had traditionally been a constituency of Islamic Jihad). Periodically, Hamas' ideologues would take issue with the intimacy of Islamic Jihad's relationship with Shi'a Iran -- especially during the rare cases when Islamic Jihad members converted to Shi'ism.

One of the most visible periods of tension between Hamas and Islamic Jihad occurred in 1994 and 1995 when, even as they continued to conduct joint operations, the groups engaged in a mild but public competition over Islamic Jihad leaders' shortlived decision to establish a dawa social welfare network of their own to compete with that of Hamas.

Even then, however, Hamas and Islamic Jihad sought to work through their differences. For example, according to the indictment of several Islamic Jihad operatives in the US, it was around this period that "the members of the conspiracy would and did work with PIJ and its leaders in coordinating its activities with Hamas, including the possibility of Hamas and PIJ reconciling their differences and engaging in joint terrorism operations". [2] According to US prosecutors, in early 1995, Islamic Jihad members "continued to discuss PIJ recruitment, the interrelationship between PIJ and Hamas, and the possibility of joining forces". [3]

While competition over dominance in the realm of social welfare activity was shortlived, Islamic Jihad does run a small number of dawa organisations that fill logistical and financial support functions and build grassroots support for the group. Most important among these are the al Ansar Charity Association and the al Ihsan Society (also known as the Birr Elehssan Society) in Gaza. [4] However, Islamic Jihad no longer aspires to build the kind of widespread dawa infrastructure that would challenge the Hamas dawa apparatus, thus removing a key bone of contention between the two groups.

Tensions were also low when Hamas was strong and Islamic Jihad weak. Islamic Jihad's founder and first secretary general, Fathi Shiqaqi, personally articulated the group's pro-Shi'a ideological underpinnings and was instrumental in maintaining the group's operational capacity. In the wake of his assassination on 26 October 1995, and following a brief spate of attacks in early 1996, Islamic Jihad terror attacks dropped off so dramatically that in 1997 the Jerusalem Post reported "a void in the organisation so deep that the group barely functions today". [5]

Hamas grew in popularity and operational expertise throughout this period and therefore felt no real threat from Islamic Jihad throughout the mid-to-late 1990s. With the beginning of the al Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, however, Islamic Jihad -- reinvigorated by the release of its cadre from Palestinian prisons and an infusion of Iranian funding -- sprang back to life. Since then, it has claimed responsibility for scores of terrorist attacks. In part, this has reflected the group's greater coordination with other Palestinian groups, especially Hamas.

United in the al Aqsa Intifada

Following the collapse of peace negotiations and the eruption of the al Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, Iran pressed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to work even closer together. In its 2002 West Bank raids, Israel seized a Palestinian General Intelligence Services document dated 1 June 2000 that describes a meeting between Iranian ambassador to Syria Sheikh al-Islam and Islamic Jihad secretary general Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, which took place on the eve of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The Iranian ambassador requested "that the PIJ and Hamas carry out terrorist attacks 'inside Palestine', without assuming responsibility for them". [6]

The following year, in a document dated October 2001, Palestinian Preventive Security chief Jibril Rajoub briefed Yasser Arafat on the activities of Palestinian terrorist groups in Syria, citing intelligence indicating that "intensive meetings are being held in Damascus, in which leaders of the Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front [for the Liberation of Palestine] and Hizbullah take part, in an attempt to increase the joint activities 'inside', with financial support from Iran". [7]

Iran's coaxing -- and consequent financial support -- proved successful. As early as October 2000, Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar announced that Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders were meeting with Fatah and Palestinian Authority officials "at least once daily". Meanwhile, Abdullah Shami, an Islamic Jihad leader in Gaza, stated that "all are going to share in the clashes". [8] Six months later, Hamas spokesman Ibrahim Ghawshah described the "harmony" that quickly developed between "the Islamic forces represented in the Hamas and [Islamic] Jihad movements and the national forces, especially the Fatah movement". [9] Speaking at an April 2001 conference in Tehran in support of the intifada, Palestine National Council Speaker Salim alZanun declared: "Brothers, we are united with the national and Islamic forces. This means all factions, including the Hamas movement and Islamic Jihad." [10]

Indeed, documents seized in Israel's March 2002 raid of the Jenin refugee camp revealed that Islamic Jihad, Hamas and Fatah operatives had established a joint framework for patrolling the camp, including a "combined force" and a "joint operations room". [11] Internal Palestinian intelligence documents seized by Israel indicate senior Palestinian security officers "supplied PIJ and Hamas in the Jenin area with most of the weapons in their possession". [12] With the help of Hamas, Islamic Jihad also gained technical expertise in the manufacture of rockets, developing a homemade rocket similar to Hamas' Qassam. On 25 May 2002, Islamic Jihad's AlQuds Brigade fired three of these rockets from Gaza toward the Israeli town of Sderot, and the attack was broadcast on Hizbullah's alManar television station. [13]

According to West Bank Hamas leader Adnan Asfour, successful Israeli counterterrorism measures led Hamas and Islamic Jihad to coordinate operations not only at the local, cellular level but also at the level of more senior leadership. "With the expansion of Israel's circle of aggression, there must be an expansion of the circle of resistance," Asfour explained in an October 2003 interview. [14]

To this end, Hamas and Islamic Jihad negotiated a preliminary deal to merge their military wings in late 2003, reportedly agreed upon (but in the end never implemented) by Hamas leader Khalid Mishal and Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah at a meeting of the group's leadership in Beirut. [15] Such cooperation, however, has now dissolved into conflict, not over tactics or ideology but over who dominates the media.

'Media Jihad'

Hamad, the Hamas communications chief, has described the media as "the decisive weapon". [16] This is borne out in the Hamas charter, which highlights the importance of having "educators and teachers, information and media people" involved in awakening the masses and resistance.

The charter states that "the book, the article, the bulletin, the sermon, the thesis, the popular poem, the poetic ode, the song, the play and others" are all important vehicles for ideological mobilisation. [17] Hamas therefore prints newspapers and leaflets, runs Internet sites, controls mosques and even supports singing troupes -- all of which praise Hamas and espouse its ideology. In one case, three of the Hamas operatives who carried out the suicide bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya on Passover in April 2002 -- including the suicide bomber -- were members of a Hamas singing troupe. [18]

Losing the battle of the 'media Jihad' to the smaller, less popular Islamic Jihad is therefore a tragic failure in the eyes of the Hamas communication committee. In the October meeting of Hamas propagandists, Fathi Hamad lamented Islamic Jihad's ability to project itself as an equal to Hamas despite being smaller, lacking a developed social welfare wing and commanding less support on the street.

"We outnumber them, we have many more mosques, and much more commitment, but they are ahead of us in the satellite TV stations, and their websites are much bigger than the group itself," Hamad claimed. He added: "They are stealing attacks from Hamas, exaggerate the number of the killed, and inflate the numbers of their street

demonstrations as if they are a domestic group, even though they are supported by Hizbullah. The media has turned them into the equals of the Muslim Brotherhood [Hamas]." [19]

Why now?

It is no coincidence that Hamas' sudden inferiority complex coincides with Israeli plans for 'disengagement' from Gaza and the aggressive jockeying among Palestinian factions eager for a piece of the political pie. The death of long-serving Palestine Liberation Organisation leader Yasser Arafat has only exacerbated the political turmoil now engulfing Gaza (and to a lesser extent the West Bank). While Hamas candidates are participating in municipal elections, support for the group is strongest at this grassroots, social welfare level.

However, Hamas decided not to field candidates in presidential elections and remains noncommittal about fielding candidates for the legislative council. Lacking a clear leadership structure in the wake of Israeli assassinations of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Abdel Aziz al Rantissi and others, the group appears concerned that it would not fare well enough in elections to warrant running -- an assumption borne out by several recent polls.

For example, a poll conducted by Birzeit University in December 2004 reveals that while 65.8 percent of respondents oppose disarming 'militias' like Fatah's al Aqsa Martyrs and Hamas' Qassam Brigades, they also consistently rank Hamas well behind Fatah on such issues as which group is more likely to achieve a satisfactory resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or improve Palestinians' inter-Arab and international relations.

Even considering Hamas' popular social welfare activity, respondents ranked Fatah higher than Hamas (44.2 per cent to 25 per cent) when asked which group was more likely to achieve a solution to economic and social problems. [20]

Such data is Hamas' poison pill, since any prospect for Hamas or Islamic Jihad supporting a temporary ceasefire (or hudna) will likely be contingent on some sort of powersharing agreement between the new leadership of the Palestinian Authority and these groups. Whether in the form of actual government posts or, more likely, as a partnership under a larger political umbrella such as a 'united national leadership body', the relative political strength of Hamas and Islamic Jihad will determine how large a slice of the political pie each can expect to get.

Moreover, as the polling data makes clear, even those Palestinians who supported the use of terror over the past few years are now fatigued and looking to translate their perceived tactical success into concrete political gains. It is no wonder then that Hamas fears losing ground to Islamic Jihad in a 'media jihad' for the hearts and minds of Palestinians and is genuinely concerned that Islamic Jihad has "managed to take over the media and to get ahead of us, and are now intensively competing with us". [21]

Further implications of infighting

In light of at least one violent exchange between Hamas and Islamic Jihad over the past few months -- Islamic Jihad members reportedly took over a Hamas mosque by force three months ago -- these verbal clashes are not to be taken lightly. While infighting between militant Islamist groups would undermine their operational capacity, it could also make restoring law and order to the streets of Gaza much more difficult for the newly elected Palestinian leadership.

Short of gaining what they see as their fair share of political sway in any powersharing arrangement, playing the spoiler could become the preferred policy of either -- or both -- of these militant groups. At least then they would make the evening news, scoring a victory in the 'media jihad'.

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Notes:

1. Arnon Regular, 'Leading Hamas preacher warns of clash with Islamic Jihad,' Haaretz (15 December 2004).
2. US v. Sami al Arian et al, superseding indictment, CASE No. 8:03CR77T30TBM, Middle District of Florida, Tampa Division, 2004.
3. Ibid.
4. See 'Operation for the Confiscation of Terror Funds - Background,' Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (26 February 2004); and US v. Sami al Arian, op. cit.
5. 'The big fish that got away,' Jerusalem Post (17 October 1997).
6. Israel Defense Forces, 'Jenin, the Palestinian suicide capital,' 18 April 2002. Available online.
7. 'Iran and Syria as strategic supports for Palestinian terrorism (based on the interrogations of arrested Palestinian terrorists and captured Palestinian Authority documents),' Israel Defense Forces, Military Intelligence (September 2002).
8. Keith Richburg, 'Arafat turns to militants in uprising - freed extremists become part of Palestine "resistance",' Washington Post (25 October 2000); and 'Arafat making tactical alliance with Islamic Jihad and Hamas,' International Herald Tribune (25 October 2000).
9. 'Ghoushe: We are committed to launching martyrdom operations - coordination with Fatah helped in expanding confrontations,' alMostakbal* (3 March 2001)
10. 'Islamic Jihad urges Muslims to fight Israel,' Reuters (25 April 2001).
11. Israel Defense Forces, 'Jenin, the Palestinian suicide capital,' op.cit.
12. Israel Defense Forces, 'The Fatah and the PA security apparatuses in the Jenin area closely cooperate with PIJ and Hamas,' April 9, 2002. Available online. These security officers included Jamal Switat, deputy head of PA Preventive Security in Jenin and a man named Al Rah.
13. Israel Defense Forces Spokesperson's Unit press release, 'Following in the steps of Hamas and Fatah, Islamic Jihad has also added the manufacture of weapons, intended for terror attacks against Israel, to its products,' (27 May 2002).
14. Ramit PlushnickMasti, 'Palestinian militant groups join forces, get help from Hezbollah,' Associated Press (28 October 2003).
15. Ehud Ya'ari, 'The HamasJihad axis,' Jerusalem Report (17 November 2003).
16. Arnon Regular, 'Leading Hamas preacher warns of clash with Islamic Jihad,' Haaretz (15 December 2004).
17. Hamas charter, available online at www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/Hamas.htm
18. Author interview with Israeli officials, Tel Aviv (18 November 2004).
19. Arnon Regular, 'Leading Hamas Preacher Warns of Clash with Islamic Jihad,' op. cit.
20. 'Increase in support for negotiations; support for Fatah on the rise,' Development Studies Programme, Birzeit University (15 December 2004).
21. Arnon Regular, 'Leading Hamas Preacher Warns of Clash with Islamic Jihad,' op. cit.

* Lebanese newspaper

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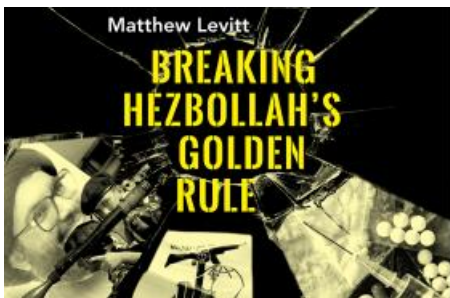
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