

# Moderately Deadly

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Responding to the March 22, 2004, assassination of Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the Palestinian prime minister said, "Yassin is known for his moderation and he was controlling the Hamas" from being more radical. Though frequently called the group's "moderate" leader, Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin has been directly implicated in authorizing, directing, funding, and providing foot soldiers for Hamas terrorist operations. In August 2003 concrete evidence of such activity led the United States to list Yassin and five other Hamas leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT). In so doing, the U.S. government froze the assets of these leaders and banned U.S. nationals from engaging in transactions with them. U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice responded to the attack on Yassin saying, "Let's remember that Hamas is a terrorist organization and that Sheikh Yassin has himself, personally, we believe, been involved in terrorist planning."

## 'MODERATION' IN CONTEXT

Hamas's "internal" leadership led mainly by Yassin and Abdel Aziz al Rantisi in Gaza appears relatively moderate only when compared to the "external" leadership based primarily in Damascus, including Khalid Mishal, Mousa Abu Marzook, Imad al-Alami, and others. The external leadership has the luxury of sponsoring radical actions from the comfort of their Syrian safe haven without consequence. The internal leadership, however, must consider the crackdowns Israel (and, periodically, the Palestinian Authority) imposes in the wake of terrorist attacks. The internal leadership is also sensitive to the impact of the group's attacks on grassroots support for Hamas among average Palestinians. This relative moderation, however, should not be mistaken for nonviolence. Yassin and the Hamas internal leadership remain committed to the group's terrorist agenda as articulated in the Hamas charter, which declares, "There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad." Indeed, Yassin has applied this ideology to conflicts well beyond the Palestinian question, as in his description of the war against Saddam's regime as "a new crusade against the Muslim nation" and his call for Muslims worldwide to "strike Western interests...everywhere." What some mistake for moderation on the part of Yassin's leadership is therefore better understood as prudent tactical planning based on a strategic commitment to violence.

## HAMAS FOUNDER

When Yassin and several colleagues officially founded Hamas in December 1987, the group had been active since the 1960s as the Yassin-led Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, Egyptian authorities briefly

detained Yassin for his radical activity with the Brotherhood in 1965, when Egypt still controlled Gaza. Under Yassin's leadership, longtime Muslim Brotherhood activists were simply redirected from promoting Islamic observance to engaging in violent anti-Israel activities. Khaled Mishal acknowledges that "Inside, we had several names: the Islamic Movement [Hamas]; Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Front, the (Islamic) Youth Center and the Islamic Bloc. It was one organization with different names." According to Mishal, Yassin and other internal and external Hamas leaders attended a 1983 meeting -- four years before the group's official founding -- at which "the decision to found the Palestinian Islamic project for the cause and preparing the requirements for its success was taken."

Long before the invention of the name Hamas, Yassin's organization was plotting terrorist attacks. As Khaled Mishal recounts: "In 1983, we carried out our first military experience under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin; the 1983 organization that sought to gather weapons to prepare groups for military training and launch the jihad project." Mishal concedes that even back then Iran was funding Yassin's activities, noting that "It is no secret that the 1983 arms deal was funded from abroad; Hamas was still forming." Palestinian author Khaled Hroub also notes that various attacks against Israeli interests from 1985 to 1987 were conducted by Yassin's group; the several "military cells organized by the Muslim Brotherhood" included the Yahya al-Ghuoul's Mujahideen of Mifraqa Group, Salah Shehadah's Group Number 44, and Muhammad Sharathah's Group Number 101.

#### FATHER OF HAMAS DAWA NETWORK

Khaled Mishal credits Yassin, along with Abdulfattah Doukhan, Mohamad Hassan Shamaa, and Mohamad Taha, with founding the Hamas dawa, or education, network by "work[ing] in the field of the Islamic Call and education in addition to gathering donations and working in [Islamic Center and Islamic Association] associations." Palestinian scholar Ziad Abu-Amr notes that in 1967 the Brotherhood -- under Yassin -- began to focus in earnest on social and charitable organizations to spread its message and influence and rally support for the Islamic movement by using "alms money, zakat, to help thousands of needy families." According to Mishal, "one of the most important [Hamas] institutions is the Islamic Center founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin."

Yassin's network of social-welfare organizations, mosques, and schools mirrored the structure he helped perfect as a Muslim Brotherhood activist. Yassin's focus on the Hamas dawa -- its "call" to Islam, conducted among Palestinian Muslims with the objective of recruiting and mobilizing them -- provided the group with a systematic means of penetrating Palestinian society. Once recruited, Yassin organized the Hamas cadre into small cells -- often no more than three members each -- throughout Gaza Strip.

Together with Ismail Abu Shanab, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, Ibrahim al-Yazuri, Mahmud al-Zahar, Ahmed Isamil Bahr, and others, Yassin established three umbrella organizations to serve as the backbone of Hamas in Gaza: al-Jam'iyah al-Islamiyah (the Islamic Center), al-Mujjama' al-Islamiyah (the Islamic Society), and the Islamic University of Gaza.

The importance of the dawa network Yassin founded was highlighted at a 1993 Hamas meeting in Philadelphia, which the FBI surreptitiously monitored. In a presentation on "the situation in Palestine" and the status of "Islamic works" tied to Hamas, Muin Kamel Mohammed Shabib, an identified Izz al Din al Qassam operative described the institutions tied to Hamas as falling under the following classifications: educational (schools, universities), social and charitable (refugees, orphans, relief), cultural, health institutions (clinics, medical centers), public syndicates, technical institutions, sports clubs, media, religious institutions, and women's institutions.

Shabib then proceeded to list specific institutions tied to Hamas, which he described as "our institutions." In the Gaza Strip alone these included the Islamic University, the Islamic Complex [Society], the Islamic Association, Al-Salah Association, the Young Woman Association, Al-Wafa Association for the Elderly, the Orphans Center, some of al-Zakah committees, and some of general service committees that received new licenses such as the organization of

the Truth and the Law. Today, these and other Hamas organizations actively radicalize Palestinian society, recruit new members, provide operatives with day jobs, launder funds for Qassam Brigade terrorist cells, and provide logistical support for their terrorist attacks.

#### TERROR LINKS

Beyond founding both the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and then Hamas, and on top of establishing the group's logistical and financial support network in the form of the Hamas dawa, Yassin himself has been directly tied to Hamas terrorism. Arrested in 1984, Yassin told Israeli authorities he founded an organization intent on "fighting non-religious [Palestinian] factions in the territories and carrying out jihad operations against Israel." Released in a 1985 prisoner exchange, Yassin hatched a 1989 plot to kidnap and murder Israeli soldiers and negotiate the exchange of their bodies for the release of Hamas prisoners. Yassin was arrested again after the abduction and murder of Ilan Saadon and Avi Sasportas and was sentenced to two life terms for his role in these killings. Under interrogation, Yassin conceded he had tasked Salah Shehadeh with establishing the Iz al Din al Qassam Brigades (a point confirmed by Shehadeh in his own interrogation), and that he personally "approved of the drafting of terrorists as well as the carrying out of terrorist attacks."

Yassin was again released from prison in 1997 as part of a deal with Jordan's King Hussein (in the wake of Israel's botched attempt to assassinate Khalid Mishal in Jordan). Palestinian security forces placed Yassin under house arrest several times between 1998 and 2000 in the hope of curtailing Hamas efforts to undermine the peace process. Since then, Yassin has played an increasingly proactive role in coordinating and financing Hamas attacks.

According to information published by the U.S. Treasury Department, "Yassin is the head of Hamas in Gaza. He maintains a direct line of communication with other Hamas leaders on coordination of Hamas's military activities and openly admits that there is no distinguishing the political and military wings of Hamas. Yassin also conveys messages about operational planning to other Palestinian terrorist organizations." According to the intelligence presented by the Treasury Department, Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi operates directly under Yassin and "maintains a direct line of communication for the coordination of military operations" with him. As Human Rights Watch has observed, "there is abundant evidence that the [Hamas] military wing is accountable to a political steering committee that includes Shaikh Ahmad Yassin, the group's acknowledged 'spiritual leader.'"

The Treasury Department has also noted that "surrounding Yassin is an entourage of personal 'bodyguards,' including many implicated in providing information and supplies to fugitives, recruiting personnel to undertake military operations, planning terrorist cells, attacking settlements, and manufacturing weapons and explosives." Indeed, among those killed with Yassin were two bodyguards with long records as Hamas operatives involved in acts of terrorism.

In one well-known March 2000 case, Palestinian security officials arrested several members of Yassin's entourage, including two bodyguards, and found explosives (intended for an attack against Israel) hidden in a kindergarten in Gaza's Shati refugee camp. The arrests followed a raid by Israeli commandos on a Hamas safe house in the Israeli Arab town of Taibeh. That raid and the Palestinian arrests foiled a major terrorist attack by five suicide bombers sent by Yassin to execute simultaneous attacks across Israel. Authorities determined that Yassin and his bodyguards were directly tied to the Taibeh plot; one of them, Nasser al Bughdadi, dispatched the bombers to the West Bank, and Yassin personally gave the go-ahead.

Yassin is also directly tied to the one documented case of operational crossover between Hamas and al Qaeda. In 1997 a group of five Hamas dawa activists traveled to Pakistan for religious training. One of them, Nabil Aukal, was recruited by a Palestinian jihadist for military training, first in an al-Ansar camp in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and then in al Qaeda's Derunta training camp in Afghanistan. In April 1998, upon completion of his training and his

return to the Gaza, Aukal visited Sheikh Yassin and informed him of his recent training and plans to establish a terrorist cell in Gaza. Yassin appointed Iyad al Beihk, a Hamas operative, to serve as his go-between with Aukal, and provided Aukal with \$5,000 seed money to finance his Gaza terrorist cell. Later, when Aukal and one of his recruits planned to travel back to Pakistan and Afghanistan for additional training and meetings, Yassin provided another \$5,000 to cover the cost of the trip and prepared a cover story for Israeli authorities about medical treatment in Jordan. A month before his arrest in June 2000, Aukal hosted Richard Reid, the "Shoebomber," in his home.

Whether the counterterrorism dividends of Israeli's decision to assassinate Yassin will outweigh the costs has yet to be seen. The action was both tactically and strategically risky, pitting the advantages of undermining the Hamas leadership structure against likely terrorist reprisals and the further radicalization of Palestinian society. This cost-benefit analysis was not lost on Israeli decision makers. Some, like Interior Minister Avraham Poraz, concluded "the damage [of killing Yassin] is greater than the usefulness." While others, such as Brig. General Yossi Kupperwasser, head of the research branch within Israeli military intelligence, assessed that assassinating Yassin left a "deep void" within the Hamas leadership.

Yassin's direct ties to terrorism, however, belie the myth that portrays him a moderate, nonviolent leader. Indeed, even his recent statement suggesting Hamas could temporarily suspend attacks from Gaza in the wake of a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, included the caveat that "the Israeli withdrawal from the Strip will not stop the struggle to defend the homeland. Are we fighting only for Gaza? Where is Jerusalem? Where is the West Bank, the refugees and the holy sites? We could temporarily suspend our attacks in Gaza, but the military struggle in the West Bank will continue."

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