

Shaykh Yassin and Hamas Terror

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Brief Analysis

Responding to Monday's assassination of Hamas founder Shaykh Ahmed Yassin, Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei stated, "Yassin is known for his moderation, and he was controlling the Hamas" from being more radical. Though frequently called the group's "moderate" leader, 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. In so doing, the U.S. government froze the assets of these leaders and banned U.S. nationals from engaging in transactions with them.

'Moderation' in Context

Hamas's "internal" leadership led mainly by Yassin in Gaza appears relatively moderate only when compared to the "external" leadership based primarily in Damascus, including Khaled Mashal, Mousa Abu Marzouk, Imad al-Alami, and others. The external leadership has the luxury of sponsoring radical actions without consequence. The internal leadership, however, must consider the crackdowns that Israel (and, periodically, the Palestinian Authority) imposes in the wake of terrorist attacks. 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 activities with the Brotherhood in 1965, when Egypt still controlled Gaza. Long before the adoption of the name Hamas, the organization was plotting terrorist attacks. As Khaled Mashal recounts, "In 1983, we carried out our first military experience under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin; the 1983 organization sought to gather weapons to prepare groups for military training and launch the jihad project." 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.

In 1967, according to Palestinian scholar Ziad Abu Amr, Yassin's Brotherhood began to focus in earnest on social and charitable organizations, attempting to spread their influence and rally support for the Islamic movement by using "alms money, zakat, to help thousands of needy families." Yassin's focus on the Hamas dawa—its "call" to Islam conducted among Palestinian Muslims with the objective of recruiting and mobilizing—provided the group with a systematic means of penetrating Palestinian society. Today, the Hamas dawa organizations actively radicalize Palestinian society, recruit new members, provide operatives with day jobs, launder funds, and provide logistical support for terrorist attacks.

Terror Links

Yassin himself has been directly tied to Hamas terrorism. Arrested in 1984, Yassin told Israeli authorities that 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 Israeli soldiers Ilan Saadon and Avi Sasportas and was sentenced to two life terms for his role in these killings. Under interrogation, Yassin conceded that he had tasked Salah Shehadeh with establishing the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas (a point confirmed by Shehadeh in his own interrogation), and that Yassin 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 Khaled Mashal in Jordan). Palestinian security forces placed Yassin under house arrest several times between 1998 and 2000 in the hope of curtailing Hamas terror 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." 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 on Monday 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 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 the bodyguards, 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. Nabil Aukal, a Hamas dawa activist undergoing religious instruction in Pakistan, was recruited in February 1998 for military training in the al-Qaeda camps of Afghanistan. In April of that year, upon completion of his al-Qaeda

training, Aukal visited Yassin in Gaza. The shaykh appointed a go-between and provided Aukal with \$5,000 seed money to finance Aukal's Gaza terrorist cell. Later, when Aukal and one of his recruits wanted to travel back to Pakistan and Afghanistan for additional training and meetings, Yassin provided another \$5,000 and prepared a cover story for the Israeli authorities about medical treatment in Jordan. A month before his arrest by Israel in June 2000, Aukal hosted Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber," in his home.

Conclusion

Whether the counterterrorism dividends of Israel's decision to assassinate Yassin will outweigh the costs is yet to be seen. The action was both tactically and strategically risky—pitting the advantages of undermining Hamas leadership against likely terrorist reprisals and the further radicalization of Palestinian society. Yassin's direct ties to terrorism, however, belie the myth that portrays him as a moderate, nonviolent leader. Even his recent statement suggesting that Hamas could temporarily suspend attacks from Gaza in the wake of a complete Israeli withdrawal from that territory 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."

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow in terrorism studies at The Washington Institute. This PeaceWatch draws from the author's forthcoming Institute monograph, *Exposing Hamas: Funding Terror under the Cover of Charity*.

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