

# Hamas's Political Wing:

## Terror by Other Means

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

On January 5, 2004, the council of Arab interior ministers concluded its twenty-first session in Tunis by renewing its "strong condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and sources." The question remains whether this condemnation will lead to action against Hamas, including its political leadership.

### The Role of Hamas's Political Leaders

Hamas leaders readily acknowledge the central role that the organization's "political wing" plays in operational decisionmaking. For example, in May 2002, Hamas military commander Salah Shehada stated publicly that "the political apparatus is sovereign over the military apparatus, and a decision of the political [echelon] takes precedence over the decision of the military [echelon], without intervening in military operations." In July 2001, Hamas leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi told Reuters, "The [Hamas] political leadership has freed the hand of the [Izz al-Din al-Qassam] brigades to do whatever they want against the brothers of monkey and pigs."

Indeed, it is the political leadership that has most clearly stated the movement's goals. According to one such leader, Ismail Abu Shanab, "There are no civilians in Israel because every citizen is required to serve in the army. We are at war with Israel. . . . If the Israelis withdraw to the 1967 borders, we would consider that a truce, not the end of the war." Khaled Mishal, head of the Hamas political bureau, emphasized that the group is "not ready to establish any kind of relation with the Zionist enemy," while spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmed Yassin suggested that Jews leave Israel and "found a state in Europe." Regarding Hamas's decision not to sign a new ceasefire agreement after a lull in suicide attacks, Rantisi explained in December 2003 that "the martyrdom operations come as waves so there are gaps between the waves. We are just in the period of a gap between waves." A few days later, he whipped up emotions at a Hamas rally by saying, "I swear to Allah that not one Jew will remain on our land of Palestine."

### Political Leaders As Military Commanders

A recent U.S. Treasury Department fact sheet described Hamas's political wing as the organization's "most effective and powerful wing" because "it controls the West Bank and prison branches of Hamas and has gained total financial control." Underling this point, the Treasury report identified some of the strictly military functions served by several senior Hamas political leaders, including the following:

- Imad al-Alami, a member of Hamas's external leadership in Damascus, "has had oversight responsibility for the military wing of Hamas within the Palestinian territories. As a Hamas military leader, al-Alami directs sending personnel and funding to the West Bank and Gaza."
- Usama Hamdan, a senior Hamas official in Lebanon, is responsible for maintaining contact with other terrorist groups for "the purpose of strengthening the ties between these organizations in order to strengthen an international Islamic Jihad." Moreover, Hamdan "has worked with other Hamas and Hizballah leaders on initiatives to develop and activate the military network inside the Palestinian territories in support of the current Intifada, including the movement of weapons, explosives and personnel to the West Bank and Gaza for Hamas fighters."
- Khalid Mishal, head of the Hamas political committee in Damascus, personally oversees Hamas terrorist cells and supervises their operations. Not only are there "cells in the military wing based in the West Bank that are under [Mishal's] control," these cells "have been implicated in efforts by Hamas to plan large attacks that would undermine the road map peace plan." In fact, Mishal "has been responsible for supervising assassination operations, bombings and the killing of Israeli settlers. To execute Hamas military activities, [he] maintains a direct link to Gaza-based Hamas leader, Abdel Aziz Rantisi. He also provides instructions to other parts of the Hamas military wing."

One of the most detailed accounts of the significant role played by the Hamas political leadership in the organization's terrorist activities was provided by Muhammad Salah (a.k.a. Abu Ahmed), a self-described Hamas member from the Chicago suburb of Bridgeview. Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzook dispatched Salah to the West Bank and Gaza four times between 1989 and 1993 to fund and reorganize the Hamas military wing after Israeli arrests and deportations of Hamas activists. Although Marzook was purportedly only a political official, he instructed Salah "to recruit people in the U.S." Around 1990, Salah "selected ten people to serve on a military team and had them trained in the United States by Muslim instructors from the United States and Lebanon who had military experience." Some of them learned how to prepare explosive charges. These activists were slated to join Hamas in its terrorist activities in Israel. In addition to recruiting and training potential terrorists, Salah suggested to Marzook that Hamas "murder [Sari Nusseibeh] for his playing an important role in the peace talks." In a thirty-seven-page affidavit, the FBI asserted that Salah had facilitated Hamas terrorist training efforts that "included mixing poisons, development of chemical weapons, and preparing remote control explosive devices." The affidavit also cited one instance in which Salah gave a Hamas member more than \$48,000 to buy weapons for use in Hamas attacks. One of these weapons, an M-16 rifle, was used to kill an Israeli soldier in 1992.

#### Planning Attacks on the Ground

Aside from the activities of Hamas political figures outside the territories, Hamas political leaders in the West Bank and Gaza also plan and participate in attacks. For example, by his own admission, Ismail Abu Shanab was "involved in planning and carrying out the kidnapping and murder of Israeli soldier Ilan Sa'adon." Similarly, in a 1994 telephone conversation secretly recorded by the FBI, Shaykh Jamil Hamami, a Hamas political leader in the West Bank, told fellow Hamas members in the United States and Yemen that "we . . . will act to make [the peace process] fail too. Operations [of] particular types will take place to shake this self-rule administration." Moreover, the U.S. Treasury Department noted that "in October of 2002, Abdelaziz al-Rantisi was reported in Al-Hayat as personally claiming responsibility for the assassination of a Palestinian Authority Police Colonel." None of the above would surprise Brig. Gen. Nizar Ammar of the Palestinian Authority (PA), who has long highlighted the overlap between Hamas's political, social, and military wings. According to him, "We learned from interrogations that some of the people involved in operations inside Israel had been in the political wing only forty-eight hours before the operation. This is a big problem for the PA interrogators because people jump between the political and military wings at a moment's notice."

#### Conclusion

In an August 2003 announcement designating five charities and six senior Hamas political leaders as terrorist entities, the U.S. Treasury Department asserted that "the political leadership of Hamas directs its terrorist networks just as they oversee their other activities." An October 2002 Human Rights Watch report offered a similar assessment, noting, "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,' as well as spokespersons such as Ismail Abu Shanab, Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi, and Mahmud Zahar. Yassin himself, as well as Salah Shehadeh, the late founder and commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, have confirmed in public remarks that the military wing implements the policies that are set by the political wing."

Indeed, for Hamas, political activities are an extension of terrorism. The international community must respond with the unequivocal message that no cause, however legitimate, justifies the use of terrorism. In the professional assessment of Brigadier General Ammar, "the difference between the wings [of Hamas] is often a fiction." Were the council of Arab interior ministers to extend their condemnation of terror to include Hamas, they would go a long way toward exposing this fiction.

Matthew Levitt, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, is author of the forthcoming monograph *Exposing Hamas: Funding Terror under the Cover of Charity*.

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