

## Hamas's Lessons from Lebanon

May 25, 2000



### Brief Analysis

Israel's quick withdrawal from Lebanon and the collapse of the South Lebanon Army (SLA) is certain to be studied by Hamas, the main Palestinian Islamist organization. To understand what lessons Hamas may draw, it is useful to look at two recent developments: discussion inside Hamas about "Lebanonizing" the Palestinian territories and the early May arrest of Hamas military commander Muhammad Deif by the Palestinian Authority (PA).

'Lebanonizing' the Territories? Statements of Hamas activists have focused on the need to "Lebanonize" the Palestinian territories. In an unsigned article in the May edition of the London-based monthly *Filastin al-Muslimah*, the main official organ of Hamas, the movement published a special report on its terrorist activity in the past two years, under the title "If Hamas operations in the past two years would have succeeded, they would have created horror in Israel." The article described the development by Hamas of new kinds of sophisticated weapons and remote-controlled devices, so as not to use suicide bombing. One of the goals of these new self-made weapons was to use them against Israeli patrols, such as in Lebanon. Another major attempt was made to kidnap Israeli soldiers. In general, the article emphasizes the wish of Hamas to develop guerrilla warfare against the IDF, a modus operandi that could easily win the support of the Palestinian public.

Following this article, *Filastin al-Muslimah* has published a series of interviews with various Palestinian prominent figures, asking them, "Is the resistance still possible in the shadow of peace?" The longest and most emphasized interview was with Dr. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Rantisi, who was just recently released from a long period of detention by the PA, and who is number two in Hamas's political hierarchy. Most of those interviewed, other than Palestinian officials, praise the Lebanese model of resistance. They argue that "the language of resistance is the only language understood by the Israelis, and not the language of negotiations." In other words, the article raises a general sense among many Palestinians that they should adopt the Lebanese model of resistance and move to a general armed struggle of guerrilla warfare that will focus on Israeli soldiers rather than on civilians. It is worth remembering that the name Hamas--*Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah*, or the Islamic resistance movement--was first used by Hizballah in the second half of the 1980s. The name was later adopted by the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood in December 1987, to mark the total change in their policy toward Israel, from passive opposition to violent struggle.

The Lebanese model could obtain the support of a relatively large proportion of the Palestinians. This would be dangerous not only to Israel, but to Yasir Arafat and his PA as well. Arafat and the Palestinian Security Services may have been trying to block support for Lebanonization by arresting the person who could lead such a struggle, and at the start of the process rather than after it is too late.

Another important issue that Hamas is admitting for the first time in the article is the operational support Iran provides to the movement. The article quotes reports in the Israeli press for the first time in the movement's written media, saying that the external command of Hamas tried to establish a military wing in the territories by recruiting Palestinian students abroad. These students were sent to an Iranian military college and trained in various fighting techniques, using myriad weapons and explosives. They were sent back to the Palestinian territories in separate stages, through Jordan and over the Allenby Bridge, to use as special forces for commando operations against the

Israeli troops.

**Deif's Arrest** Muhammad Deif, the most wanted Hamas military commander of Hamas, was arrested by the Palestinian Security Services in early May. Deif, a resident of the Gaza Strip, was one of the closest aides of Yahya 'Ayyash, "the engineer" who was the commander of Hamas's 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam military apparatus and was killed by a sophisticated Israeli bomb in January 1996. The death of 'Ayyash led to the division of the terrorist body: one part in the West Bank, led by Muhi al-Din al-Sharif and the 'Awadallah brothers until all were killed in 1998; the other in the Gaza Strip, led by Deif, who was considered the senior activist of the terrorist apparatus. Deif, being responsible for the most bloody terrorist operations in Israel and the Palestinian areas in the second half of the 1990s, was earnestly sought by Israeli officials, who often voiced demands for his arrest. Israel also regarded Deif's arrest as an important test case for the seriousness of the PA's intentions to fight Hamas terrorism. The fact that Deif lived for the past five years in Gaza, where he conducted the terrorist activity of the Islamic movement, raised many questions in Israel. Gaza, unlike the West Bank, is a closed area controlled by the Palestinians and is closer to being an independent state.

The general belief among the Israeli security and intelligence circles in recent years was that the Palestinian Security Services had long tracked Muhammad Deif but refrained from arresting him for political reasons. The most important of these were the wish to keep him as a bargaining card both with Israel and Hamas, his popularity among the greater Palestinian public for being a symbol of revenge in the Israelis, and the possibility of supervising Hamas's terrorist activity through the surveillance of his moves. In return, the Qassam brigades under Deif's command refrained in the past two years from using Gaza as a base for bloody operations against civilians in Israel. The Qassam Brigades attacked only in the West Bank or Jerusalem, mainly in those areas still controlled militarily by Israel.

One of the reasons for Deif's arrest may be found in the events that led Israeli security forces to uncover a Hamas squad in the Israeli Arab village of Taybeh last February. Deif sent this squad from Gaza and planned for it to carry out at least three major suicide operations against Israeli civilians. Arafat may have considered this squad a break of "the unwritten rules of the game" between Hamas and the PA, rules that prevented the PA from arresting Deif earlier. Another reason could be Israeli intentions to capture or kill him, or reliable information given by Israel with regard to his whereabouts, so the PA could no longer ignore his activity.

**Conclusions** Despite the setback from the PA's arrest of Deif, Hamas may be able to keep up or even step up its terrorist activities, thanks to the boost in morale provided by the perception that Hizballah defeated Israel in southern Lebanon. Whether Hamas will be able to carry out attacks will depend to a considerable extent on whether the PA attests more Hamas military activists.

Reuven Paz, the academic director of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, Israel, specializes in the research of Islamic movements and Palestinian society. He is the 2000 Meyerhoff Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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