

PolicyWatch 1449

Jihadist Groups in Gaza: A Developing Threat

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Although Israel's current military action is directed against a Hamas regime that has controlled the Gaza Strip since its 2007 coup, a small coterie of other militant Islamist organizations has emerged in the Strip over the past two years. These Salafi-jihadist groups are small and have no direct ties to al-Qaeda, but they have grown in strength and appear increasingly inclined to act independently of Hamas leadership. While Hamas has taken steps to crack down on these groups recently, it is unclear how the current conflict will affect the organization's willingness and ability to do so in the future. If Hamas proves unwilling to continue taking these groups on, they could eventually pose a serious threat not only to Hamas, but also to Israeli and Western interests in the region.

Background and Ideology

The best known Salafi-jihadist groups in Gaza are Jaish al-Islam, led by the powerful clan leader Mumtaz Dughmush; Fatah al-Islam, run by Saliman Abu Lafi and Raffik Abu Aker; and Jaish al-Ummah, controlled by Ismail Hammed. These leaders defected from other Palestinian rejectionist groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, regarding them as insufficiently aggressive in conducting terrorist attacks. Other like-minded groups based in Gaza include Jaish Allah, al-Takfir, Lion's Den of Jihad Fighters, and Jaljalat (an Arabic term meaning "rolling thunder").

Each of these Salafi-jihadist groups can boast no more than a few dozen militants, and are sometimes reinforced by a handful of foreign fighters, most notably Egyptians who significantly enhance the groups' otherwise minimal capabilities. None of these groups appear to have operational or organizational links to al-Qaeda and its leadership -- which is ironic, given Usama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri's regular public focus on Palestinian issues.

Although they receive no directives from al-Qaeda, these groups identify with al-Qaeda's Salafi-jihadist ideology and model their tactics and strategy on that organization. Like other extreme Sunni Islamist groups, the ideological objective of these Salafi-jihadist groups is to revive the golden days of ancient Islam (Salafi) and establish a global Islamic caliphate that implements sharia (Islamic law). These Salafi-jihadist organizations sanctify the use of violence (jihad) as the main way of realizing this vision. As such, it is legitimate to use force against non-Muslims (infidels), regimes considered insufficiently Islamic, and other perceived enemies of Islam.

Both Hamas and the Gazan jihadist groups share a desire to destroy Israel and impose sharia, but Hamas focuses on local interests limited to the Palestinian arena. Hamas, therefore, directs its energy largely at Israel, while these groups target foreigners as well. The Salafi-jihadist groups espouse an ideology of "pure resistance," within which there is no room for ceasefires or temporary halts in attacks against the enemy. Some of their members were therefore especially motivated to continue attacks following Hamas's agreement to a tahdiyah, or lull.

Operations of Jihadist Groups in Gaza

While it is important not to exaggerate the terrorist capabilities of these Salafi-jihadist groups, as it is highly doubtful they have the capability to carry out major, complex operations, they are nonetheless growing in strength. The organizations have worked -- both separately and sometimes cooperatively -- to promote high-profile terrorist attacks to gain worldwide recognition, receive financial support from radical elements in the Arab world, prove their jihadist resolve to attract young people, and be recognized as a factor that Hamas cannot ignore.

For example, activists from Jaish al-Islam and Fatah al-Islam joined together to plan an attack on the Middle East Quartet's special envoy and former British prime minister Tony Blair during his Gaza visit in July 2008. The plan involved snipers and explosives targeting Blair and his entourage. Fortunately, Israel obtained high-quality intelligence about the plot and passed it along to Blair before he traveled to Gaza. He subsequently canceled the visit, thus thwarting the attack.

The Salafi-jihadist groups have also conducted attacks against Christian and Western institutions in the Strip, including the 2006 kidnapping of BBC journalist Alan Johnston, the February 2008 bombing of the YMCA Library, and the May 2008 attack against a school run by nuns in Tel al-Hawa. These organizations have also targeted establishments in Gaza that they deem "un-Islamic," such as Internet cafes and video stores.

Until recently, Israel was alone in grappling with the jihadist threat in Gaza. Israelis were not only concerned about the threat these groups posed to Israel, but also that left unchecked, these groups would try to turn Gaza into a breeding ground for regional attacks. In turn, Israel has foiled several Jaish al-Islam plots directed against Israel proper and has been able to quickly eliminate the few jihadist cells that have emerged in the West Bank and among Israeli Arabs.

Hamas's View of Salafi Groups

For a number of years, Hamas permitted these groups to grow because it viewed them as a marginal phenomenon that posed no threat to its power and status in Gaza and because they shared Hamas's hostility toward Israel. In fact, Jaish al-Islam's highest-profile attack -- the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit -- was launched in cooperation with Hamas.

But since these groups have gained strength and seem inclined to act independently, Hamas has shifted its approach over the past few months. It has gone from indulgence and dialogue to confrontation. After a member of one of these groups fired on a Hamas policeman, Hamas responded brutally. In September 2008, Hamas surrounded a complex of homes belonging to the Dughmush clan. Knowing that women and children were inside, Hamas fired live ammunition into the complex, killing eleven and injuring dozens. Jaish al-Islam has subsequently refrained from action against Hamas. Hamas has since confiscated weapons and arrested group activists to underscore the message that Hamas will not tolerate attacks against its own members.

Implications

Although these groups do not aim to usurp Hamas's control of Gaza, the expansion of their power and popularity poses an ideological and practical challenge for Hamas and emphasizes the dichotomy in the movement; on one hand, Hamas is a resistance movement siding with an ongoing jihadist struggle, on the other, it is a sovereign power that is required to compromise on daily governance issues. Hamas is worried that this phenomenon will gain popularity among the young generation, since it represents "pure resistance." Confronting this phenomenon not only endangers Hamas's image on the street, but also forces the organization to confront one of the cornerstones of its identity: the ideological adherence to jihad as a way to achieve its goals. This very dilemma may go a long way toward explaining why Hamas allowed the tahdiyah to erode; attacks from time to time allow Hamas to explain that it remains committed to resistance.

In the wake of the current crisis, Hamas may choose to ease its crackdown on these jihadist groups, causing repercussions beyond Gaza. Strengthened Salafi-jihadist groups in Gaza could ultimately pose a threat not only to Hamas, but also, as the various attacks and foiled plots over the past several years illustrate, to Israeli and Western interests as well.

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