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Al-Qaeda in Gaza: Isolating “the Base”

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In 1996, Osama bin Laden declared jihad against the American forces occupying Saudi Arabia, calling for Muslims to expel the infidels from the “land of the two holy places.” The first sacred ground mentioned in this statement, however, was not Saudi Arabia but Palestine. His words seething with hatred, bin Laden scorned the Arab regimes for failing to recapture Jerusalem and described the situation as a festering wound upon the Islamic *umma*.^[1] Fourteen years later, even after orchestrating devastating attacks in three Western capitals, Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda is still unable to do much against Israel besides issuing scathing diatribes. Its most vigorous efforts to establish itself in the Palestinian arena have been in the Gaza Strip. Here, however, al-Qaeda-linked groups are stymied by a perhaps surprising adversary: Hamas. But despite Hamas’s efforts to suppress them, *Salafi*-jihadi groups maintain an underground presence. Even if al-Qaeda affiliates remain weak operationally in comparison to Hamas, al-Qaeda’s ideology of global jihad seems to be on the rise in Gaza. Meanwhile, the al-Qaeda leadership is relentless in pursuing new and ingenious ways for its agents to penetrate the Strip. A Hamas weakened by a tightened blockade or another war with Israel would leave an opening for *Salafi*-jihadi militants. The prospect of these al-Qaeda-linked factions upsetting a fragile peace needs to be considered among the many other factors relevant to engagement with Hamas.

As bin Laden’s declaration demonstrates, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict always figured prominently in al-Qaeda’s propaganda, but this emphasis has only become stronger in the years since 9/11. After deciding to concentrate its resources on crushing “the head of the snake”—America—al-Qaeda has not been able to strike again on US soil. At the same time, it has squandered its favour in the Arab world with bloody attacks on Muslim civilians. A third blow to al-Qaeda’s image is its failure to mount direct attacks against Israel, a source of considerable embarrassment to the organisation. In 2008, when jihadist web-sites hosted an interview with Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda’s second in command, the first questioner asked him:

Excuse me, Mr. Zawahiri, but who is it who is killing with Your Excellency’s blessing the innocents in Baghdad, Morocco and Algeria? Do you consider the killing of women and children to be jihad? ... Why have you—to this day—not carried out any strike in Israel? Or is it easier to kill Muslims in the markets?^[2]

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Al-Qaeda styles itself the defender of the Palestinians, particularly the Gazans, as a way of deflecting such criticism and bolstering Arab support. In doing so, it has often clashed with Hamas, Gaza's de facto government and the most powerful Palestinian militant group.

Although both Hamas and al-Qaeda place their struggles in an Islamist context, Hamas's goals ultimately a nationalist one: Palestinian liberation. In contrast, al-Qaeda has a focus on the "far jihad" against America and the West, which alienates many in Hamas. During an exchange of insults and accusations between the two movements in September 2009, Hamas posted a paper on its web-site highlighting the work of the prominent Muslim Brotherhood cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi.[3] Al-Qaradawi's writings justify Palestinian resistance against Israel while castigating al-Qaeda for its attacks overseas. His disapproval draws on a distinction in Islamist thought between a "defensive jihad" against an occupying power (Israel) and an improper "offensive jihad" that fosters ill will toward Muslims in the international community (a veiled criticism of al-Qaeda). On a more practical level, Hamas is also wary of al-Qaeda-linked groups threatening its shaky truce with Jerusalem and inciting Israeli retaliation.

In fact, it was Hamas's truce with Israel coupled with its participation in Palestinian elections which set the stage for a public confrontation between the two groups. The dispute began in the wake of Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, when al-Zawahiri applauded Hamas's accession to power but called for the movement to fight on.[4] Al-Zawahiri's tone became openly hostile when Hamas signed the Mecca Accords in early 2007, an act he equated with submitting to "the US Satan and his Saudi agent." [5] By the end of the year, after mentioning Hamas's deviation in at least a dozen statements, Osama bin Laden finally declared that Hamas had "renounced its religion." [6]

Al-Qaeda's verbal barrage paralleled an increasingly defiant attitude toward Hamas rule among Gaza's *Salafi*-jihadi groups. Most of these factions, such as Jaljalat, Jund Ansar Allah, and Jaish al-Islam, began appearing in Gaza around 2005. This tumultuous period, which saw the withdrawal of Israeli forces, Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections, and the ouster of Fatah, provided the opportunity these groups needed to take root. Seeking to challenge Hamas's newly-won hegemony, the *Salafi*-jihadists began to embarrass Hamas by violating the truce with Israel and assassinating Hamas leaders who tried to suppress them. In June 2008, Jund Ansar Allah attempted an attack on the Nahal Oz fuel terminal (near the Gaza-Israel border) that, if successful, could very well have instigated a major Israeli response.[7] After its bombings killed five senior Hamas officials in August 2008, Jaish al-Islam fought Hamas in Gaza streets.[8] Jaljalat operatives were the first to strike against Israel after the truce ending the Gaza War, planting an IED along the border fence that killed an IDF soldier.[9] In November 2008, Jaish al-

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Islam again raised the ire of the Hamas leadership with rocket attacks on Ashkelon and the western Negev.[10]

The *Salafi*-jihadists' open disregard for Hamas control culminated in a blatant challenge which elicited a harsh Hamas response. On August 13, 2009, the jihadist Internet buzzed with the announcement of a talk to be given the next day at Rafah's Ibn Taymiyyah mosque. The sermon, entitled "Advice worth its weight in gold for the Ismail Haniya [Hamas] government," was to be delivered by Sheikh Abd al-Latif Musa, Jund Ansar Allah's spiritual leader. Anticipating a protest, Hamas stationed its police around the mosque. When Musa proceeded to condemn Hamas for failing to implement sharia law and announced the formation of an Islamic emirate in Gaza, Hamas was ready. Its forces quickly cordoned off the area and began firing rocket-propelled grenades at the building. The seven-hour battle ended with 130 wounded and 24 dead, some of whom were summarily executed by Hamas forces as they tried to surrender.[11]

A Covert Al-Qaeda Presence and Its Dangers

The bloody confrontation at Rafah did not spell the end of Gaza's unofficial al-Qaeda affiliates. Instead, it just seems to have sent them underground. For its part, Hamas seems to tolerate some level of *Salafi*-jihadi activity in Gaza for several reasons. One possibility is the useful role these organisations play in deflecting blame for unpopular terrorist attacks. Al-Qaeda operational expertise may also be valuable to Hamas, as seen in the joint Hamas-Jaish al-Islam kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.[12] Finally, the spectre of al-Qaeda influence allows Hamas to accuse its Palestinian rivals of plotting against it and to present itself as the only barrier to an al-Qaeda stronghold in Gaza.[13]

However, Hamas's ability to police these cells has been questionable at times. For example, when Jaish al-Islam captured BBC journalist Alan Johnston in June 2007, the group was apparently willing to execute its hostage if Hamas tried to rescue him.[14] In exchange for releasing Johnston unharmed, Hamas reportedly gave Jaish al-Islam \$5 million and over a million Kalashnikov rounds.[15] Jaish al-Islam's threats also succeeded in freeing its members from Hamas jails after the bombing of the YMCA library in Gaza City.[16] When questioned about its loyalties after continued struggles with *Salafi*-jihadi groups, Hamas released 50 Jund Ansar Allah detainees for the holiday of Eid ul-Fitr in September 2009.[17] Hamas describes its raids against *Salafi*-jihadi groups as routine policing of criminal elements, but this claim is belied by the participation of Hamas's paramilitary wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.[18] The *Salafi*-jihadists are believed to be responsible for the bombs detonated under the vehicles and near the homes of Hamas leaders after these sweeps.[19]

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More significant than Hamas's occasional failure to curb *Salafi*-jihadi activities is the stream of defectors, many of them high-level, from Hamas to al-Qaeda-inspired groups. Fed up with Hamas's failure to attack Israel and its sluggishness in implementing sharia law, these men see the *Salafi*-jihadi groups as a more legitimate mantle for the Palestinian cause. For example, Fuad Banat, a Jund Ansar Allah commander killed in the Rafah mosque shootout, had originally been sent to Gaza by the Hamas leadership in Damascus.[20] Mumtaz Dughmush left Hamas's Qassam Brigades to help found Jaish al-Islam.[21] Al-Qaeda encourages these desertions through its messages urging Hamas soldiers to turn on their commanders and join the growing *Salafi*-jihadi movement.[22] The al-Qaeda leadership thus appears to have resigned itself from confronting Hamas in favour of slowly undermining it—man by man—from within. As Abu Mustafa, a *Salafi*-jihadi leader, said in a rare interview with the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*,

[Taking up arms against Hamas] won't be necessary. They will destroy themselves. ... Hamas is like a block of ice in the sun. Every minute they get smaller – and we get larger.
[23]

While Gaza's *Salafi*-jihadists lie low and gather weapons and recruits, al-Qaeda higher-ups stress spying and deception in order to bypass the Israeli and Egyptian blockade around Gaza. An al-Qaeda foothold in Gaza would be a welcome training ground for new recruits, who could gain much-needed experience manufacturing explosive devices, launching mortars and rockets, and engaging in firefights with IDF soldiers. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the deceased leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, once said that his group "fights in Iraq, but its eyes are on Jerusalem." [24] Al-Zarqawi himself had once been given \$35,000 by his superiors to find reliable methods of entry into Israel.[25] Now, as the US withdraws from active combat operations in Iraq, many Sunni militants are moving west and seeking to take up Zarqawi's legacy.[26] It is estimated that 800 to 1,000 people crossed the Egypt-Israel border in January 2010 alone, some of them undoubtedly sent by al-Qaeda.[27] Saleh al-Qarawi, the leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades charged with reinvigorating al-Qaeda in the Levant, escaped Saudi Arabia by disguising himself as a Westerner.[28] Al-Qaeda agents have shown skill at creating multiple identities, forging passports, and using bleaching products to alter their skin tone.[29] Some al-Qaeda members have gone as far as dressing in women's clothing to evade detection at border crossings.[30] An intercepted letter from Yemen's Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to *Salafi*-jihadists in Gaza proposes sending Somali and Ethiopian operatives to Israel posing as Jewish refugees.[31] Similarly, in a recently discovered manual for Palestinian jihadists, an al-Qaeda writer suggests joining human rights organisations as a way of collecting target intelligence.[32] Given this emphasis on secrecy, the splintering and constant turnover of *Salafi*-jihadi groups may be

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deliberate—a tactic to counter Hamas surveillance rather than a sign of weakness.[33] Likewise, the dearth of information on these groups could just as well signal improved operational security as it does a lack of activity.

Although al-Qaeda has not formally endorsed any of Gaza's *Salafi*-jihadi groups, it has provided them with tactical guidance and advice. Al-Qaeda leader Abu al-Laith al-Libi, for example, corresponded with members of the Jaljalat network before he was killed in Afghanistan.[34] Yusuf Miqdad, a resident of Gaza's Shati refugee camp, communicated with global al-Qaeda on the Internet and travelled to Saudi Arabia to obtain funds for an al-Qaeda cell before he was picked up by Israeli authorities.[35] Al-Qaeda stands to gain at least as much as local Palestinian militants from such exchanges, as sympathetic individuals can provide al-Qaeda with detailed reconnaissance information regarding possible targets as well as border areas where personnel might infiltrate into the Strip.[36] The ranks of Gaza's *Salafi*-jihadi groups already include Syrians, Yemenis, and even Europeans who passed through the notoriously porous Egyptian border.[37] These esteemed veterans of the international jihad are especially potent tools for the recruitment and mobilisation of local Palestinians. But even if the impact of these foreigners is minimal, al-Qaeda's propaganda continues to diffuse into Gaza through satellite TV channels, the Internet, and smuggled literature.[38]

Al-Qaeda's borderless character also enables it to draw on disaffected Israeli Arabs in a way that Hamas cannot. If Hamas continues its moderating trend, radicalised Arabs within Israel may turn more and more to the "pure resistance" espoused by Gaza's *Salafi*-jihadists rather than Hamas's nationalist approach. There is some evidence to believe this is already happening. In July 2008, six Arab students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem appeared in court on allegations they planned to shoot down President Bush's helicopter during his visit to Israel. One of the men had inquired about obtaining a missile for this purpose on global al-Qaeda forums.[39] A month later, another Israeli Arab student was charged with plotting bomb attacks at a central bus station and along a road frequently used by IDF vehicles. The suspect had visited web-sites affiliated with the global jihad, where he encountered al-Qaeda operatives in Gaza and learned how to fashion explosives.[40] In June 2010, Israeli police announced that three Israeli Arabs had been indicted for the murder of an Israeli taxi driver. The men, part of a seven-person al-Qaeda-inspired group which authorities called "one of the most dangerous cells we have ever uncovered," had also planned kidnappings and bombings of various Jewish- and Christian-owned businesses.[41] Their activities had only been discovered when two of the conspirators were detained in Africa after attempting to join the Somali jihad.[42]

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Though al-Qaeda tends to reserve its formal sanction for only the most proven groups, it cannot prevent others from aligning themselves with its ideology. Thus, in considering the potential for an al-Qaeda presence in Gaza, it is important to examine local political dynamics. Since Hamas seized power in 2007, criminal gangs, local clans, and Fatah members have all used *Salafi-jihadi* ideology as a bludgeon to discredit Hamas and rally their own supporters.[43] While this renders their genuine jihadist credentials suspect, these groups retain considerable influence through their participation in Gaza's lucrative trade in drugs and weapons. The *Salafi-jihadists* may also derive some measure of "safe haven" from their position within Gaza's web of clan-based criminals, which Hamas can suppress but never fully control.[44] Whatever their true motivations, these groups' propaganda finds receptive ears among Gaza's youth.[45] Ironically, Hamas may be aiding this radicalisation process through its program of gradual, but forced, Islamisation. It is only a small step in the minds of many Gazans from justifying jihadist attacks against Israel to justifying them against all non-Muslims. To some degree, then, Hamas propaganda that frames the struggle against Israel as a religious one has helped foster an undercurrent of support for *Salafi-jihadi* ideas. In polls conducted in 2006, 79 percent of those responding in Gaza supported al-Qaeda attacks on the West.[46] Reviewing these results, the author noted,

To a larger extent than other Arabs, Palestinians ... tend to associate all attacks on the West [by Al Qaeda] with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and therefore regard such actions as legitimate resistance rather than terrorism.[47]

Such sentiments put Hamas in an awkward position with respect to the *Salafi-jihadists*. On one hand, Hamas does not want to be pulled into another Gaza War; on the other hand, it cannot be seen as defending Israel. Thus, when critics accused Hamas of collaborating with the West after its actions at the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque, Hamas claimed that Sheikh Musa had "gone mad" and that the violence arose out of a "misunderstanding." [48] Hamas's dilemma in this regard was encapsulated by a political cartoon in the Saudi daily *Al-Watan*. The drawing depicts a Hamas soldier angrily shooting his severed arm, the sleeve of which reads "Jund Ansar Allah." [49] Hamas's backtracking contrasts sharply with the line taken by the *Salafi-jihadists*, who may lie on the fringe but present a much more unified and consistent position.

While the al-Qaeda leadership may not currently have the means to establish a regional base in Gaza, its interest in the area cannot be denied. Five years ago, a myopic focus on Palestinian terror organisations led Israel to miss the global jihadists beginning to appear in the Strip.[50] Israel cannot afford to wait until a critical mass of these foreign fighters coalesces—perhaps helped by radicalised Israeli Arabs or Hamas defectors—and becomes strong enough to execute a major attack. Al-Qaeda's operational record clearly shows that it is capable of committing

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large-scale strikes with a small number of terrorists. Al-Qaeda's history also demonstrates its predilection for a "slow war" approach, with long periods of meticulous preparation punctuated by unexpected, hard-hitting attacks. The al-Qaeda leadership's hesitation to endorse Gaza's *Salafi*-jihadi groups may simply reflect its desire for one of these groups to first prove itself with a stunning baptism of fire. To be sure, *Salafi*-jihadi militants face significant logistical difficulties given the current state of siege around Gaza. Nevertheless, one large attack against Jerusalem would likely have more of an impact than in any other theatre. The *Salafi*-jihadists do not need to defeat Hamas in order to significantly compromise the broader peace process. It is easy, for example, to imagine a second captured Israeli soldier igniting another Gaza War.[51] Similarly, the reactions of Egypt, Jordan, and Israel to the August 2010 rocket attacks on Eilat and Aqaba illustrate the pressure *Salafi*-jihadi groups could bring down on Hamas with just a few well-placed rockets. Perhaps most importantly, successful al-Qaeda attacks on Israel would be a huge propaganda coup for al-Qaeda's global jihad. Joining the battle against the Zionists helps sustain al-Qaeda's notion of a "clash of civilizations" in which Israel and the West are arrayed against the entire Muslim world.[52]

Policy Recommendations

The potential for an al-Qaeda base in concert with Gaza's existing *Salafi*-jihadi groups cannot be ignored among the other issues affecting the Palestinian-Israeli situation. Israel must be careful that its boycott of Hamas does not serve to empower even more radical elements in Gaza. If al-Qaeda and the *Salafi*-jihadists were to gain significant strength relative to (and perhaps because of) an increasingly moderate Hamas, it might lie in Israel's interest to somehow come to terms with Hamas. While this contingency gives many pause, it has been promoted by former senior officials in both Israel and the US.[53] Al-Qaeda would likely have two options in this situation: remain silent, which weakens its image as true guardian of the Palestinians, or openly vie for power, which in the past has led to an overwhelming response from Hamas (e.g., Jund Ansar Allah in 2009).

Israel must also ensure that its own Arab citizens are not attracted to the *Salafi*-jihadi ideology emerging in Gaza. Israel's walls and fences have been successful in shielding it from suicide attacks originating in the West Bank, but these defenses are ineffective against Palestinian terrorists within Israel's own borders. While "homegrown" radicalisation into al-Qaeda has been a major topic in the terrorism literature in the last five years, it has not been closely examined in the Israeli context. What seems consistent among the studies that have been conducted elsewhere, however, is the salience of mosques and prisons as major incubators for jihadist thought. Given the formidable reputation of Israeli prisons and the thousands of Palestinian



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radicals they hold, the dissemination of global jihadist propaganda is a serious concern. With respect to *Salafi*-jihadism propagated by Palestinian imams, both Fatah and Hamas have placed mosques under surveillance as a way of checking each other's influence in the West Bank and Gaza, respectively.[54] Israel may wish to enact a similar program to track *Salafi*-jihadi extremism at home.

Engaging with Hamas would also further isolate al-Qaeda. An Israeli recognition of Hamas as an elected government with de facto control of Gaza would not change the facts on the ground, but it could help widen the divide between Hamas and al-Qaeda. Many Arabs neither identify with al-Qaeda nor support its attacks, but nonetheless admire it for its continued trumpeting of Palestinian rights. As long as Hamas remains a shunned pariah state, al-Qaeda will use the plight of the Gazans as a rallying cry for its cause. Advancing a peace that includes Gaza would deny al-Qaeda this oft-cited grievance against the West.

Al-Qaeda is now about 20 years old, long past the life expectancy of most terrorist organisations. Its resilience is due in large part to the strength not of its regional franchises, but of the tentacle-like network that holds them together and allocates funds, fighters, and guidance. What al-Qaeda fears more than anything, then, is the isolation of its various fronts in the global jihad. Its failure to establish itself in Gaza, arguably its most appealing locale, says a lot about its limitations and the ideological corner into which it has driven itself. Israel should make sure it stays there.

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