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## Israel sets sites on Islamic organizations

**As Israel targets Islamic charitable organizations during raids on Hamas' alleged social network, some ask if the strategy is imprudent.**

By Dominic Moran in Tel Aviv for ISN Security Watch (25/07/08)

A series of closure and confiscation raids in the West Bank in recent months is raising concerns regarding the impact and wisdom of operations targeting alleged Hamas-affiliated social institutions.

Israel argues that the wide range of media, charity and commercial institutions targeted in recent raids are affiliated with a wider Hamas social network. This claim is vehemently denied in most cases by the organizations, with Palestinian sources claiming only a tangential, inconsequential association in others.

The raids have disrupted institutional activities through the mass confiscation of equipment and goods and closure orders.

### Hearts and minds

Israeli security services have failed to release significant material relating to the alleged association of targeted groups and institutions, making it difficult to judge the veracity of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claims regarding their alleged links to Hamas.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry has sought to bolster these claims through the release of [images](#) of children dressed in militant regalia purportedly seized in raids on alleged Hamas social institutions.

It is widely accepted that Hamas operates an extensive network of social institutions throughout the Palestinian territories. However, demonstrating links between the militant group and Islamic charitable institutions has proved extremely difficult.

"The whole establishment of Hamas' strength is based not on the military, terrorist wing but mostly on the social strata which is kind of supporting terrorism and their political stance in Palestinian society," Yoram Schweitzer, who heads the Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict program at the Institute for National Security Studies, told ISN Security Watch.

The Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) administration has also moved against alleged Hamas-affiliated organizations in the West Bank. President Mahmoud Abbas signed off on an order for the dissolution of 92 Islamic charity committees in December.

This followed a September directive from Prime Minister Salam Fayyad ordering the closure of 103 organizations over alleged financial improprieties. It appears likely that many organizations on the list continue to operate in some capacity given the spotty nature of PA security control in the West Bank.

Responding to Abbas' dissolution orders, Hamas spokesperson Sami Abu Zuhri [appeared to acknowledge](#) his movement's links to at least some of the institutions affected, saying, "This is an attempt to weaken Hamas, but the Palestinian citizens will pay the price, because they benefit from these committees."

"I think you have to look at these operations within the general context of Israeli attempts to curtail the strengthening of Hamas' infrastructure in the West Bank vis-a-vis the Palestinian Authority," Schweitzer said.

The recent decision to intensify the campaign against Islamic social institutions in the West Bank reportedly enjoys broad support in the Israeli leadership, with the Shin Bet, the IDF, Premier Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Ehud Barak expressing rare unanimity on the issue.

Asked by ISN Security Watch about Israeli claims that the institutions targeted are associated with Hamas, Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group head Bassam Eid said, "They probably are." He believes "Islamic institutions are running their own politics under the umbrella of humanitarian aid."

#### **Controversial closures**

While Islamic institutions have been targeted throughout the West Bank, Hebron has become an important testing ground for both the prosecution of, and legal challenges to, the Israeli closure and confiscation raids.

Two charities in the city have been singled out by the Israeli military, the Young Men's Muslim Association and Islamic Charitable Society (ICS).

The ICS currently owns and operates two orphanages, schools, a dairy, sewing workshop, bakeries, a large mall, a children's library and a 30-apartment residential building, employing 550 workers. The entrances to a new ICS school slated for opening in September with 1,200 students have been welded shut by the IDF.

This extensive network has been targeted since February, when the IDF issued six military orders for the closure of ICS institutions and ordered businesses operating on ICS-owned premises to shut down.

"They are undoubtedly Islamic charities, there is no question about that, but they do a job that isn't being done by anybody else," John Lynes, from the Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) in Hebron, told ISN Security Watch. The CPT has organized solidarity events for ICS orphanages facing IDF closure orders.

"Local people don't regard it (ICS) as a Hamas organization and I'm sure in my own mind that it isn't," Lynes said.

ICS admits that some employees belong to Hamas but otherwise disavows any connection, pointing out that some employees are Fatah supporters and that the society has been operating since 1962, long before the establishment of Hamas.

Israeli forces raided ICS institutions on 6 March and 1 April seizing equipment, clothing, school buses and food and clothing from ICS warehouses and posting military closure orders on several buildings and offices. The charity estimated the cost of the raids in lost equipment and damage at US\$418,000.

Describing the raids, Lynes said, "The Israeli army [...] went into a bakery and literally destroyed all the equipment. They went into a sewing machine workshop, which is used for training the orphan girls, and they wrecked all the sewing machines and removed all the textiles. The machines turned up in the town dump.

A similar series of Israeli raids has been reported in Nablus since 7 July, with six charities reportedly joining the 50-odd closed by Israel in the last two years.

The city's five-storey mall was also raided this month, seemingly because of the alleged affiliation of its administrative head with Hamas. Closure notices were reportedly posted on mall premises [warning](#) "anyone found in this center will be considered as working on behalf of Hamas and puts himself and his properties in danger."

The closure order on the mall - which with its broad-based 4,000 shareholder ownership structure is clearly not Hamas-owned - also reportedly transferred control of the mall and its assets to the IDF with immediate effect, though the 70 shops of the complex were functioning as usual at last report.

"These orders aren't always enforced," Lynes said, "There are very many buildings that have been given closure orders and then the closure orders have been allowed to expire."

To Schweitzer, if charities are "serving to funnel money and means to other purposes then you have to fight it," But, he acknowledged, "for Israelis it doesn't look that good; even for me I don't feel that comfortable to see that orphans or other social activities are being interfered with."

In Hebron, the ICS likely relies on outside funding to top up money received from the society's commercial properties. Therefore, the military closure of revenue-producing business tenants appears designed to disrupt activities while putting pressure on outside funding bodies to further underwrite ICS charitable institutions.

### **Burden of proof**

Given the political utility of the Israeli raids for Hamas in portraying Islamic social institutions – affiliated or otherwise - as under joint Israeli-Fatah attack, the task of demonstrating a direct link between the operations of social institutions and the militant movement is pressing, if problematic.

Israeli courts regularly allow backroom evidence from state intelligence agencies, and the public airing of any extant intelligence on purported links between Hamas and the affected organizations appears extremely unlikely.

"I'm sure that Hamas is doing whatever it can in order to disguise these kind of operations and to disguise the terrorist element to this," Schweitzer said, adding that "you have to set certain standards," in prosecution.

The IDF is reportedly showing some interest in a compromise deal that would stymie an upcoming legal appeal of the ICS closures in the Israeli Supreme Court. Should the ICS case proceed, it could provide an important test case for further closure appeals and may stymie

further raids.

### **Targeting funders**

In a supplementary measure, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak signed an order earlier this month making it illegal for charities and institutions to have dealings with 36 NGOs worldwide with alleged funding links to Hamas and other militant groups.

Israel claims that US\$120 million was transferred to Hamas in the Palestinian territories in 2007 alone.

Barak's move was criticized in some quarters for failing to provide evidence of complicity and putting at risk the work of a wide variety of charitable organizations both in Israel and the Palestinian territories which have no links to militant groups.

In a recent piece, Ha'aretz columnist Zvi Bar'el noted that Fatah leaders have suggested looking into alleged donations to Hamas from private Saudi donors but that such investigations have been deemed impolitic given the West's reliance on Saudi oil.

### **Playing for time**

Without the establishment of viable PA institutions, Hamas will continue to exploit the opportunity provided by the absence of adequate official social services while pointing to alleged PA and Israeli cooperation in seeking to cut off vital social stipends.

"The local people think that the Palestinian Authority is colluding in this because they want to keep everything in their own hands, and so they frown on Islamic charities for that very reason: that the Islamic charities are in effect a parallel organization to the government," Lynes said.

This impression would have been strengthened by the fact that some of the charities targeted in Israeli operations in recent months were those identified by Abbas and Fayyad in their September and December closure orders.

The PA government finds itself caught between the demands of the US, which appears intent on a security first approach, and those of a suffering populace bowed under the weight of the collapsing PA economy.

"I think Abbas is trying all the time to obey the demands of the international community and [his functioning] in the West Bank is much more to satisfy the international community than the Palestinian people themselves," Eid said.

Given the parlous state of the economy and absence of competing social services, the drive against Hamas' social network appears ill-timed at best and to be drawing in organizations and scores of individuals, such as shop owners and workers, with no links to Hamas whatsoever.

"We have to have strong cases against those institutions, that it can be proved that they are involved with other activities other than their declared purposes," Schweitzer said, advocating that Israel proceed "very carefully, very prudently and very surgically."

To Lynes the social impact is too great: "The orphans are terrified about the situation. [...] it is so unnecessary and so avoidable. Surely they can carry out their politics without affecting children."

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