

The Influence of the Islamic State on Israel's Arab Citizens and on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank

Aviad Mandelbaum and Yoram Schweitzer

The civil war that erupted in Syria in 2011 and the ongoing instability in Iraq have served as the backdrop for the growth of the ISIS organization and the ensuing establishment of the Islamic State, which contributed to the dissolution of the state structures in both Syria and Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's appointment of himself as caliph and the establishment of the Islamic State as the basis of his caliphate have inspired and driven tens of thousands of Muslim volunteers from all over the world to join the ranks of the Islamic State and perpetrate acts of terror in its name. This influence has not been lost on Israel's Arab citizens or the populations of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

In contrast to the large number of volunteers who flocked from all over the world to fight in Syria and join the ranks of the Islamic State, the response among Israel's Arab citizens has been relatively weak – although by late 2015 this phenomenon was clearly on the rise. According to reports in Israel, there have been 57 Arab citizens of Israel who have left Israel with the goal of joining the fighting in Syria, with at least 25 of those intending to join the ranks of Islamic State.¹ Most recently, one 23 year-old from Jaljuliya used a hang glider over the Golan Heights to cross the Israel-Syria border, allegedly to join the Islamic State.

In September 2014, Israel declared officially, as have various other Western countries, that any activity connected with the Islamic State is illegal, and accordingly, those who acted in its service were arrested and tried.² Over the last year alone over 40 Israeli Arabs who tried joining the Islamic State were arrested; some were caught when attempting to leave Israel, and some

were caught upon their return from fighting in Syria and Iraq.³ The age of the volunteers ranges from 19 to 30, and it is difficult to identify a common geographical thread regarding their places of origin, which include Hura in the Negev, Yasif and Yafia in the north, and central cities such as Umm al-Fahm and Tayibe.

The arrest in August 2015 of Iman Khanjo, an Israeli Arab woman who left Israel with the goal of joining Islamic State, exemplifies the diversity of the volunteers and their goals, as well as the role played by social networks in the recruitment process. Khanjo distributed propaganda materials on the internet, and through this activity was found by an Islamic State operative named Abu Ali Ashami, who contacted her online and assisted in her attempt to enter Syria.⁴ Khanjo, a 44 year-old doctoral student in Islamic studies from Shfaram, is an example of the range in level of education, social standing, place of origin, and gender of the volunteers. Her ambition to educate young Muslims in accordance with *sharia* law goes hand-in-hand with the phenomenon of “immigration” to the Islamic State with the goal of taking part in the revival of the caliphate. This phenomenon appears among families relocating to Syria, and has occurred among families in Israel as well.⁵ On a practical level, the arrest and return of Khanjo to Israel through the joint effort of Israeli and Turkish security and law enforcement authorities demonstrates how international cooperation can curtail this trend.⁶

Besides volunteering to fight in the ranks of the Islamic State, Arab citizens of Israel have engaged in various activities inspired by it, including supporting activities such as the financing of volunteers headed for Syria, contact with activists in the field, distribution of content identified with the Islamic State, and terror activities. On May 15, 2014, Adris Abu al-Qiyan was indicted on charges of conspiracy and assistance in the illegal exit of Israel. Al-Qiyan aided two volunteers, including his brother Othman Talib Ahmed Abu al-Qiyan, in leaving for Syria to enlist in the Islamic State.⁷ Indictments submitted in July 2015 against six Israeli Arab citizens, including four teachers who lived in the villages of Rahat and Hura in the Negev, indicate that they were involved in the distribution of Islamic State propaganda in the schools in their villages.⁸ There have also been cases of ideological support of the Islamic State on social networks.⁹

The fear of the transition from ideological support to actual terror activity within Israel’s borders under the inspiration of the Islamic State was realized in January 2015: seven Israeli Arabs from Nazareth were indicted for association

with the Islamic State and support of its actions. The head of this group was Adnan Sa'id Alla-a-Din, formerly an advocate with the public defender's office. Alla-a-Din recruited the group members, all in their twenties, lectured them on religion and taught them the main principles of Salafi jihadist ideology, preached to them about the need for preparation for military action and attacks against Jews, and trained and steered them for such actions with the slaughter of sheep. One of those arrested admitted that he intended to carry out a shooting attack in Israel against security forces and members of the Druze community.¹⁰

In August 2015, security officials intercepted a cell of three men from Kafr Yafiya and Nazareth who had trained in shooting and had researched possible targets for terrorist attacks, including the police station in Migdal Haemek and an army base. They monitored businesses in Yafia and Nazareth that functioned "against the spirit of Islam" and sold alcoholic beverages. The cell was formed following Facebook encounters with contacts from Yafia who enlisted with the Islamic State in Syria and today are fighting in Iraq. These individuals were a source of inspiration and encouraged their contacts in Israel to launch terrorist attacks there. Indeed, this cell hoped to execute attacks in Israel, and then join the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria. One of the cell members was in contact with Ahmad Ali Khalil Ahmad, a Salafi jihadi resident of Nazareth, serving a life prison sentence in Israel for his involvement in the murder of an Israeli taxi driver in 2009.¹¹ Some individuals from that cell then went to Africa to train with the Somali al-Shaabab organization but were arrested in Kenya and extradited to Israel.¹²

In contrast to the influence on the Arab citizens of Israel, the Islamic State wields greater influence among the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, where terror organizations identified with the Salafi jihadist stream have operated for a number of years. Such activity has led in the past to conflicts with Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007, mainly involving challenges to the hegemony of the Hamas regime. The most prominent case occurred in August 2009, when Hamas activists raided the Ibn Taymia Mosque in Dir al-Balah, killing 24 Salafist operatives, including their leader Sheik Abed-al-Latif Musa, who was considered dangerous due to his declaration of the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the Gaza Strip. The strengthening of the Islamic State since the summer of 2014 has instilled renewed momentum among Salafi jihadist activists in Gaza, and has led to a cluster of organizations from this camp declaring their support for the radical stream. Since then, there

has been a struggle underway between Hamas and Salafi jihadist elements, which involved Hamas security forces arresting dozens of their operatives and even destroying a Salafi mosque in Dir-al-Balah.

For their part, the Salafi jihadist operatives have planted bombs in public buildings and fired rockets toward Israel without Hamas approval, in order to cause friction between Hamas and Israel. Against the backdrop of the escalation of the internal struggle, an official Islamic State video clip was distributed on social networks in late June 2015 threatening Hamas and warning that the blood-drenched theater of war in the Levant will in the future be relocated to the Gaza Strip. The spokesman, Issa a-Lakta of the Sheik Raduan neighborhood in Gaza, who was formerly a Hamas operative, joined the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria in 2013. In his statement a-Lakta mentioned the slaughter carried out by Islamic State operatives last April in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp near Damascus, when they beheaded several of the Hamas commanders in the camp; he further promised to bring down the infidel Palestinian governments in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The identity and blunt public threats of a former Hamas member against continued Hamas rule of Gaza demonstrate the criticism of Hamas by Salafi jihadists, and at the same time, the rising stature of the Islamic State among Gaza Strip residents. This is also reflected in the establishment of new Salafi jihadist groups in the Strip, such as the Sheik Omar Hadid Bait al-Maqdis Brigades¹³ and Supporters of the Islamic State in Jerusalem.¹⁴

The unqualified support of these groups for the Islamic State was reflected in the establishment of ISIS in Gaza in 2014 and subsequently in their declaration of loyalty to al-Baghdadi, which to their disappointment was rejected and did not lead to their acceptance by the Islamic State as an independent Palestinian province. The refusal to recognize these groups as an exclusive province stems from their being marked by sectarianism and factionalism, their inability to establish an autonomy in Gaza ruled by *sharia* law, and lack of proof of their ability to fight Israel effectively. These circumstances violate the Islamic State admission requirements as specified in *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's English-language propaganda magazine.¹⁵ Moreover, al-Baghdadi does not see Palestinian nationalism as an independent issue, and holds that its solution will be realized through the merging of the Palestinians into the broader Islamic State that he has established, or through cooperation with Wilayat Sinai – the Islamic State's proxy in Egypt. Nonetheless, the efforts by Salafi jihadist organizations in Egypt continues,

and are reflected in attempts to unify the various Salafist organizations in the Gaza Strip, as evidenced by propaganda notices distributed in Gaza and in retaliatory strikes against Hamas symbols in Gaza, as well as in rocket fire toward Israel in an attempt to demonstrate stronger opposition to the enemy.

For its part, Hamas is fighting Islamic State supporters in Gaza, and is attempting to suppress any action undermining its hegemony over the Strip. Nevertheless, due to a variety of considerations and interests, Hamas sometimes allows operations from Gaza aiding Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in Sinai in their struggle against the Egyptian regime. This aid includes smuggling through the tunnels in Rafah, treatment of operatives wounded in battles against the Egyptian army, and sometimes even the transfer of combat intelligence.¹⁶ The double standard in Hamas' attitude toward Islamic State supporters in the Gaza Strip and the operatives in Sinai suits the pragmatism of the Hamas movement, which is driven by a central strategic consideration of maintaining its rule over the Gaza Strip while continuing to maintain the "resistance," and preserve the possibility that in the future it may benefit from the cooperation of its counterparts in Sinai.

In contrast with Gaza, where there is a prominent Salafist presence, most of which identifies with the Islamic State, it is clear that among Palestinians in the West Bank the activity of Salafi jihadist elements is relatively marginal, and accordingly, so is the influence of the Islamic State. Only a few operatives from the West Bank have joined the fighting in Syria, and even fewer have joined the ranks of the Islamic State. Similarly, the West Bank has seen only isolated incidents that reflect the presence of Salafi jihadist elements operating secretly underground, awaiting a suitable time to act. Some of them have already attempted to act over the last few years. Thus, for example, in 2013 three operatives associated with Salafi jihadist elements in Hebron were killed in an IDF counterterrorism operation to prevent their attempt to carry out a large scale attack.¹⁷ In January 2014, three operatives were arrested (one from East Jerusalem and two from Jenin) for planning attacks in Israel. The head of the terror cell was in contact with elements identified with al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Gaza, and intended to join operatives who took part in the fighting in Syria and were supposed to enter Israel to help him carry out attacks.¹⁸

Yet despite the only minor support for Islamic State that has surfaced so far, streams that identify with its ideology exist throughout the West Bank and may eventually attempt to act in its name, and perhaps even with its

guidance. Such a scenario becomes more likely should there be a significant escalation in Israeli-Palestinian relations. In a round of arrests made by the Palestinian security services in February 2015, for example, some fifteen people were arrested, suspected of ties to the Islamic State – some out of ideological identification and some out of financial incentive. Dozens of individuals have been arrested since on similar charges; most have been released.¹⁹

Although Palestinian society in Gaza and the West Bank has for the most part rejected the Islamic State, there is evidence of growing support for it.²⁰ In recent years some 200 Palestinians have made their way to the Islamic State, and in 2015 an average of two Palestinians a month were killed on the various fronts – Syria, Iraq, and Libya, in suicide attacks, ground combat, or airstrikes. Most of those killed came from Gaza, with some from Hebron, Nablus, and Jenin. Most of these volunteers are in their twenties, claiming that they are headed abroad to continue their education; many are former Hamas operatives or members of Salafist factions in Gaza.

Thus the changes in the map of Salafi jihadist organizations that have occurred in various locations in the region, in the wake of the arrival and success of the Islamic State, have not eluded the Arabs residing in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. While in Israel and the West Bank this is a relatively marginal phenomenon, significant support for the Islamic State and its ideology can be found in the Gaza Strip. The background for this is the existing infrastructure in Gaza for Salafi jihadist ideas, which preceded the arrival of ISIS and subsequently the Islamic State. Hamas' failure to institute and forcibly enforce *sharia* law on all Gaza Strip residents, and its avoidance of continuous military confrontation with Israel due to survival considerations, has led to disappointed Hamas operatives leaving the movement and joining new Salafi jihadist organizations in Gaza, as well as to cooperate with jihadist elements in Sinai.

It appears, therefore, that the future support for Islamic State actions depends to a great extent on the organization's success in surviving and expanding its conquests, and broadcasting an image of success and power. The main support is expected to come from the direction of the organizations in Gaza, but there exists potential for activity by these elements also in Israel and the West Bank, depending on developments in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The Islamic State may well use the escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in late 2015, with stabbing, vehicle, and shooting attacks,

to broaden its influence, engage new recruits, or launch terror attacks in Israel. This is already reflected in video clips posted on the social media, which promise Israel's imminent obliteration, and in the establishment of a new communications platform – al-Musra – devoted specifically to the Palestinian issue.

Notes

- 1 Reported on Channel One news on July 7, 2015 by Amir Bar-Shalom, and confirmed in a private conversation with him. See also Yasir Okbi, "Three Israelis in Turkey Seek to Join ISIS," *Maariv*, July 23, 2015; Yehoshua Briner and Gali Ginat, "Two Israelis Accused of Trying to Join ISIS Ranks," *Walla*, August 13, 2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2881604>; Yair Kraus, "Israeli Doctoral Student Accused of Joining ISIS," *NRG*, September 20, 2015, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/726/098.html?hp=1&cat=402&loc=2>.
- 2 Gili Cohen, "Yaalon Declares Islamic State to be Unlawful Organization," *Haaretz*, September 3, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2424208>.
- 3 Briner and Ginat, "Two Israelis Accused of Trying to Join ISIS Ranks."
- 4 Kraus, "Israeli Doctoral Student Accused of Joining ISIS."
- 5 Yasir Okbi, "Israeli Arab Admits: I Eluded the GSS and Joined ISIS," *Maariv Online*, May 2, 2015, <http://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/Article-473617>.
- 6 Krauss, "Israeli Doctoral Student Accused of Joining ISIS."
- 7 "Hura Resident Arrested on Suspicion of Assisting in Recruitment for Organization Fighting Assad Regime," Israel Security Agency website, May 27, 2014, <http://www.shabak.gov.il/publications/publications/Pages/NewItem270514.aspx>.
- 8 "Six Residents of Hura in the Negev Arrested for their Support of ISIS," Israel Security Agency website, July 6, 2015, <http://www.shabak.gov.il/publications/publications/Pages/NewItem060715.aspx>.
- 9 Such was the case of Muhammed Jamal Suleiman Abu Ra'ad, 22, who was convicted on May 28, 2015 of supporting ISIS through Facebook. He was the first person in Israel convicted for supporting terror on social networks. See Yoav Zeitun and Hassan Shalan, "Umm al-Fah Resident Charged with 'Liking' ISIS," *Ynet*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4662477,00.html>.
- 10 Furat Nassar and Nir Dvori, "Lawyer from North Recruited Israeli Youths for ISIS – and Trained in Slaughtering," Channel 2 News, January 15, 2015, http://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security-q1_2015/Article-9a71735488cfa41004.htm; "ISIS Activity in Israel Revealed."
- 11 "Terror Group from Yafia Involved with Establishment of ISIS Cell Arrested," Israel Security Agency website, October 1, 2015, <https://www.shabak.gov.il/publications/publications/Pages/NewItem11015.aspx>; Or Heller, Ali Levy, and Sami Abd al-Hamid, "Released for Publication: 7 Arab Israelis who Planned to Launch Terrorist Attacks and Join ISIS Arrested," *Nana 10*, October 1, 2015, <http://>

- news.nana.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=1150642&sid=126; Adi Hashmonai and Amir Buhbut, "ISIS Cell that Operated in the Nazareth Area and Planned Attacks against Soldiers Arrested," *Walla*, October 1, 2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2893731>.
- 12 "Seven Nazareth Residents Arrested on Nationalist-Related Offenses," Israel Security Agency website, June 28, 2010, www.shabak.gov.il/publications/publications/Pages/shotef280610.aspx; Ron Ben Yishai, "From the Mosque through the Internet, to Somalia: The Jihad Route," *Ynet*, June 28, 2010, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3911797,00.html>.
- 13 The Sheik Amr Hadid Bait al-Maqdis Brigades organization was named for the deputy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, known as a courageous fighter who was killed by the Americans in 2003.
- 14 The Supporters of the Islamic State in Jerusalem organization played a prominent role in escalation incidents in the Gaza Strip, with a leaflet distributed on April 9 presenting an ultimatum to Hamas to release Salafist operatives, including the well-known Salafist Sheik Adnan Elmit, who were arrested in wide-scale arrest campaigns in the strip. See "Terror News and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, January 14, 2015, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20797/H_056_15_412793579.pdf. The Sheik Amr Hadid Bait al-Maqdis Brigades organization first appeared when in early June 2015 it published on its Twitter account a video claiming responsibility for the firing of a Grad missile at Israel. See Asaf Gibor, "Troubles at Homes: Salafi Organization Presented Hamas with an Ultimatum," *NRG*, June, 2, 2015, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/698/321.html>.
- 15 *Dabiq* 5, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-522.pdf>.
- 16 Avi Issacharoff, "Revealed: Hamas Continues to Transfer ISIS Wounded from Sinai to Gaza," *Walla*, July 8, 2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2871024>; Avi Issacharoff, "Hamas UAV Revealed: Cooperation with ISIS Stronger than Ever," *Walla*, July 9, 2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2871353>.
- 17 Yoav Zeitun, "3 Wanted for Planning Attack in Israel Killed," *Ynet*, November 26, 2013, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4458357,00.html>.
- 18 Amir Buhbut, "Al-Qaeda Leader Planned Attacks in Binyanei Haumah in Jerusalem," *Walla*, January 22, 2014, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2714361>.
- 19 Avi Issacharoff, "ISIS Threat: The Palestinian Authority Arrests some 15 Suspects in the West Bank," *Walla*, February 3, 2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2825879>.
- 20 Sam Boutrous, "Does My Relative Support ISIS? 1 Million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Support ISIS," *Linga.org*, July 4, 2015, <https://www.linga.org/local-news/NzY4OQ>.