

Hamas' Internal Challenge: The Political and Ideological Impact of Violent Salafist Groups in Gaza

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Given the Gaza Strip's political and international isolation, as well as Hamas' ongoing efforts to restrict and regulate press freedoms within Gaza, there is little way to assess the actual degree of authority and control that Hamas is able to exercise over the local population. The official narrative portrays the Hamas government as solidly in charge of Gaza, enjoying a high level of popular support, and encountering virtually no political or military opposition. However, despite the indisputable strong grip that the organization indeed has over Gaza, there is more to this story. In particular, recent events, including the kidnapping and killing of an Italian activist by a local Salafist cell and the Salafists' repeated defiance of Hamas' restrictions on rocket fire against Israel, have highlighted the precarious and tense state of relations between the Hamas government and the violent Salafist groups operating within the Strip.

This article sketches the origins and development of the violent Salafist movement in Gaza, and defines the nature and magnitude of the threat that this movement poses to Hamas and its government, both politically and militarily. The article also discusses the potential impact of the Salafist movement on Hamas' broader political and organizational strategy.

The Violent Salafists in Gaza

Salafism, a revivalist movement within Sunni Islam, has been present in Gaza since the early 1970s when, led by Sheikh Salim Sharab, a number

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of Palestinian clerics trained in Saudi Arabia returned to the Strip to spread their vision of Islam.¹ However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this non-violent stream of Salafism, represented today by movements like the Palestinian branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Liberation Party), was a relatively marginal force within the Palestinian political arena.² Currently, these non-violent groups remain active in Gaza, advocating the establishment of a pan-Islamic caliphate and opposing the Hamas-led government, but they lack the popular support and legitimacy to have a strong political impact or to seriously challenge Hamas' monopoly in Gaza.

In contrast, violent Salafist cells, which represent a much newer and potentially more destabilizing phenomenon, only began to emerge in the period preceding the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, increasing their presence and activism exponentially ever since, especially in the aftermath of Hamas' takeover of the Strip.³ Organizationally, violent Salafist groups represent a loose network of small clusters of self-radicalized Palestinians, who share aspirations and ideological background and who want to challenge the hegemony of more established Islamist groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Indeed, the Palestinian Salafist-jihadists are all interested in challenging Hamas and its government. This attitude has been effectively

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summarized by Kata'ib al-Tawhid's leader Abu Abdhallah, who stated that his group aims "to overthrow Hamas and set up an Islamic caliphate in the Gaza Strip."⁴ While this purported goal seems highly unrealistic given the limited operational and organizational capacity of such groups, it is quite reflective of their antagonistic attitude toward Hamas. These groups believe that Hamas should not have engaged in the secular Palestinian political system and participated in the 2006 elections, and that since then the movement has gradually lost its Islamic character. Internally, they believe that Hamas is not doing enough

to "Islamize" the Palestinian society within Gaza, and they are highly dissatisfied with the record of this Islamic organization with respect to both imposing *sharia* law and moving towards the creation of an Islamic

government. Similarly, the Salafist-jihadist movement is highly critical of Hamas' temporary hiatus in its open confrontation of the State of Israel, and their members accuse the organization of excess moderation. For their part, Palestinian jihadists openly and directly pursue a strategy of jihad against the Jewish state.

In addition, the violent Palestinian Salafists all share a transnational jihadist orientation, and they aspire to link the nationalist Palestinian cause with the broader international jihadist network. In other words, Salafist-jihadists within Gaza are ideologically aligned with groups like al-Qaeda, and see this group, as well as other violent Salafist movements like the Lebanese Fatah al-Islam, as a viable model to emulate within the Palestinian territories.⁵ According to Salafist-jihadist activist Abu Mustafa, in an 2008 interview with *Der Spiegel*, members of the local Salafist movement "feel just like al-Qaida and we think as they do."⁶

However, despite the strong ideological links between the local violent Salafists and the international jihadist network, to date there is very little evidence of concrete organizational or operational links between Gaza-based groups and international terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda. Similarly, the movement still appears to be overwhelmingly Palestinian, despite the fact that in the past few years a small number of foreign militants, some of them returnees from Iraq, have allegedly entered Gaza through Egypt to join the ranks of the local jihadists.⁷ Regardless, the movement is homegrown and its ranks are dominated by self-radicalized Palestinians, including former Fatah members,⁸ along with an increasingly large number of disaffected Hamas militants who, disappointed by the group's "moderate drive," also joined the ranks of the violent Salafists.⁹

A lack of reliable data complicates any attempt to assess the exact number of active Salafist-jihadist militants. While both the Salafist leaders and Fatah have an interest in inflating the numbers, Hamas has consistently downplayed the magnitude of this threat.¹⁰ A conservative estimate would indicate that Salafist-jihadist militants within Gaza number between 2,500 and 3,000 members.¹¹

Exhaustively mapping the number of active groups is difficult, as existing factions implode and disappear, new micro-clusters emerge very rapidly, and many of the small and loosely affiliated cells consistently adopt a variety of front names to perpetrate their attacks.¹² Nonetheless,

it is possible to identify a number of more established and “core” organizations.

Historically, one of the first Salafist-jihadist groups to emerge in 2006 and still active to this day is Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam), created by former Popular Resistance Committee member Mumtaz Dughmush and linked to the powerful Dughmush clan in Gaza.¹³ The group first gained notoriety by taking part, together with the Hamas Qassam Brigades and the Salah al-Din Brigades, in the kidnapping of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006, as well as by orchestrating the 2007 kidnapping of BBC correspondent Alan Johnston.¹⁴ The latter incident was likely organized to embarrass and challenge the political hegemony of Hamas within Gaza and, as such, it represented an example of clan-based politics attempting to employ violent jihadist ideology to gain additional internal legitimacy. At the same time, however, the group showed its international jihadist orientation by linking Johnston’s release with that of an al-Qaeda cleric held in the UK, Abu Qatada.¹⁵

In response to this abduction, Hamas decided to target the group and its members aggressively, substantially reducing their size and importance and causing the Army of Islam to regroup and re-focus its operations mostly against internal targets (i.e., businesses deemed as “corrupt” and “un-Islamic,” or the local Christian community).¹⁶ Yet while downsized, the group is still active, and in 2009 Jaish al-Islam was allegedly involved in training Egyptian jihadists of the al-Zeitun cell, an al-Qaeda inspired group that was planning the assassination of the Israeli ambassador to Egypt.¹⁷ More recently, at least as late as December 2010, the group was also involved in rocket fire against Israel.¹⁸

Another well established local Salafist-jihadist group is the Jaish al-Ummah (Army of the Nation), founded in 2007 and led by Abu Hafsa al-Maqdisi.¹⁹ Over the years this group has focused especially on firing rockets, blowing up explosive charges, and firing shells at Israel²⁰ – often in plain disregard of Hamas’ calls to observe an informal ceasefire with Israel – while largely avoiding claims of responsibility for attacks against internal Palestinian targets.²¹ At the same time, the group has also maintained a highly antagonistic stance towards Hamas, with its leader affirming: “We believe that Hamas does not implement the rule of God on earth, and does not implement or enforce any ruling of the Islamic *sharia*.”²² The relations between the group and Hamas have been tense

over the past years, with Hamas periodically arresting and releasing the group's leaders and operatives, including al-Maqqdisi himself.²³

A third important example of Palestinian Salafist-jihadist groups is Jund Ansar Allah (the Army of Allah's Supporters), created in 2008 in Rafah by Syrian-born Abu-Abdallah al-Muhajir (Abu-Abdallah al-Suri).²⁴ Jund Ansar Allah is one of the few well-known Palestinian violent Salafist organizations, known for its role in the August 2009 clashes between the Hamas government and the Gaza-based Salafists, which resulted in one of the bloodiest episodes of internal violence in the past few years. The 2009 confrontation took place in reaction to anti-Hamas pronouncements by Abd-al-Latif Musa, one of the group's leaders as well as the imam of the Ibn Taymiyah Mosque in Rafah (one of the hubs of violent Salafism within the Gaza Strip). Musa announced the creation of the "Islamic Emirate" of Rafah, openly defying the Hamas government and questioning its sovereignty over parts of Gaza.²⁵ This was met by a harsh military response orchestrated by the Hamas government, leading to a violent confrontation between the two groups that resulted in the death of at least 29 people, and inflicting a serious blow to Jund Ansar Allah and its organizational capacity.²⁶ Since then, the group has maintained a relatively low profile, while continuing to recruit new members and promote its ideology.²⁷

In October 2009 and March 2010, in the aftermath of the August 2009 crackdown, Jund Ansar Allah resurfaced and claimed responsibility for rocket fire against Israel.²⁸

Finally, any survey of the main active Salafist-jihadist groups should also mention Jaljalat (Rolling Thunder), a cluster of loosely affiliated cells of militants allegedly led by Mahmud Talib, a former leader within Hamas' military wing. Talib allegedly decided to defect and join the ranks of the violent Salafists in protest against Hamas' decision to participate in the 2006 Palestinian elections.²⁹

Within Gaza, Jaljalat groups have attacked local internet cafes, and they have claimed responsibility for the bombing of the house of Dr Marwan Abu-Ras, a Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council,³⁰ as well as for the bombings against Hamas' security

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buildings in August 2009, following the group's crackdown on Salafists in Rafah.³¹

Beyond this specific designation, the term "Jaljalat" is also used by Hamas officials to refer to all active Salafist-jihadist cells within the Strip, and Western analysts have employed the term to refer to violent Salafists who either defected from Hamas or are currently maintaining a dual loyalty towards Hamas and the Gaza-based jihadists.³² The widespread confusion over the term's precise classification has been partially explained by Mahmud Talib, who admitted in an interview with *al-Ayyam* that "There is nothing called 'Jaljalat.' We were given this name by people at the beginning of our work,"³³ further validating the idea that the term designates a very loose network of militants rather than a well defined organization.

In addition to these well known actors, new groups keep emerging within Gaza,³⁴ and they join the ranks of the already established Salafist-jihadists in perpetrating attacks both against "un-Islamic" targets within Gaza and against Israel. Since early 2011, there has been a sharp surge in the number of rocket attacks orchestrated and carried out by the groups against Israel,³⁵ signaling a trend of increased activism by these radical clusters. Another recent episode that further confirms the presence of the Gaza-based violent Salafist clusters was the recent kidnapping and killing of an international worker of Italian nationality in April 2011.³⁶ The group that claimed responsibility for abducting Vittorio Arrigoni, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, initially asked for the release of one of the group's leaders – detained by Hamas in March 2011³⁷ – but it then clumsily killed the hostage before the negotiations with Hamas proceeded. In the Arrigoni case, Hamas reacted by promptly identifying and killing those responsible for the kidnapping, sending a strong message to the local jihadists cells.

Tackling the Salafist Threat: Policy Response and Strategic Impact

From this brief analysis is clear that since its forceful takeover of the Strip in 2007, the Hamas government in Gaza has faced an internal challenge to its authority and control.

From a military point of view, both the limited numerical and operational strengths of the Salafist-jihadist cells and the general lack of

coordination between the different radical clusters significantly reduce the magnitude of the threat to Hamas. In other words, these groups are currently no match for Hamas, and they would be unable to forcefully topple the Hamas government or take control of Gaza. Therefore, from a purely military perspective, Salafist activism is indeed more a nuisance than a strategic threat.

However, despite their relative military weakness, the challenge these groups pose is still very real. First, the violent Salafist network embodies an ideological challenge to the Hamas government, questioning its Islamic identity and its commitment to fighting against Israel. In turn, these accusations have a concrete impact upon Hamas' policymaking, as the Islamist movement and government alike feel threatened by such accusations and, as such, feel additional pressure to publicly demonstrate their commitment both to create an Islamic system within Gaza and to support the ideal of jihad against Israel. These accusations and the underlining perception that Hamas has become "too moderate" constitute a real concern for the organization, especially as the Salafist-jihadist ideology has been able to gain a constituency within Gaza, often appealing to Hamas members themselves. Recent declarations by the Hamas government in praise of Osama Bin Laden following his assassination, for example, should be read in the context of the ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of Gaza's more radical population.³⁸ At the same time, Hamas has responded to the ideological challenge by focusing even more on asserting its control over religious establishments in Gaza, for example by relying on the Ministry of Religious Endowments to consolidate its hold over the Islamic infrastructure – including mosques, charities, and other Islamic groups and associations – while seeking ways to further isolate mosques under Salafist influence.³⁹

Second, these groups represent an organizational challenge for Hamas, as the violent Salafists have been able to recruit from Hamas' rank and file. In particular, the violent Salafist cause has captured the allegiance of many

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dissatisfied members of Hamas' military wing. Analysts have repeatedly pointed out the connection between Jaljalat groups and Hamas members, noting numerous cases of double memberships in Hamas' military wing and the violent Salafist cells.⁴⁰ In this sense, the Salafist-jihadist trend constitutes a threat to the organization's cohesion and unity. To tackle this problem, Hamas has taken a series of measures to better monitor the loyalty of its rank and file. More specifically, according to Hamas Interior Minister Fathi Hammad, the group has revised its recruiting and training procedures, while "freezing" the membership of all Hamas members suspected of being active in Salafist-jihadist circles.⁴¹ Thus Hamas is highly concerned about the potential rise of a pro-Salafist cluster within its armed wing, as well as about the potential defection of Hamas members, and finally about the broader potential for the group to lose touch with part of its core constituency within Gaza.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, in the past few years these groups have been at the forefront of the attacks perpetrated against Israel, putting them in a powerful position and giving them the leverage of potentially triggering an escalation of violence with Israel, thus potentially acting as spoilers and meddling in Hamas' long term strategy in Gaza.

For these reasons, Hamas has changed its policy with respect to these groups from one of initial relative tolerance of their military operations against Israel, to one that alternates between containment of their attacks at the border⁴² and a more aggressive strategy of cracking down on the Salafist-jihadist operational cells and detaining these groups' leaders.⁴³ Particularly in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (December 2008-January 2009), Hamas has become increasingly determined in regulating and controlling these groups – primarily as a reaction to the Salafist-jihadists' repeated defiance of the Hamas government (for example by ignoring the calls to respect the unofficial ceasefire with Israel, or by openly challenging Hamas' monopoly of power within Gaza).

However, despite the increased level of vigilance against the Salafist-jihadist threat, these groups have only grown more defiant of the Hamas government, and they have periodically resurfaced to challenge its political hegemony and question its long term strategy (as demonstrated by the recent kidnapping and killing of Vittorio Arrigoni, along with the surge in rocket attacks against Israel).

Hamas and the Salafist Challenge: What's Next?

The violent Salafist groups operating within the Gaza Strip constitute a loosely affiliated network of Palestinian militants who have joined forces with those who would strengthen the ties between the nationalist Palestinian struggle and the transnational jihadists' agenda. In addition, these groups question the political hegemony and the monopoly of force that the Hamas government wields.

Despite the fact that these groups' military strength and operational capacity is limited, they still represent a real challenge to Hamas and its government. The Salafist-jihadist network has managed to threaten Hamas from an ideological perspective – both by accusing it of being too moderate and by exerting pressure to hasten the pace of Islamization of Palestinian society within Gaza. Moreover, these groups have succeeded in gaining sympathy and recruiting from members of Hamas' military wing, thus potentially threatening both the internal cohesion and the external legitimacy and popularity of the organization. Finally, by launching uncoordinated and unauthorized rocket attacks against Israel, these groups have shown their ability to escalate the level of hostilities against Israel without the prior approval of the Hamas government or leadership.

In the future, in the context of the renewed dealings with Fatah, with respect to both creating a joint national unity government and becoming more involved in a potential peace process with Israel, the constraints of the pro-Salafist constituency within Gaza could have a concrete impact on Hamas' level of ideological flexibility and practical accommodation. In other words, the Salafist threat within Gaza enhances the dilemma that Hamas has been experiencing since its electoral victory in 2006: how to accommodate the pragmatic needs of governing Gaza and gaining international status and recognition while still preserving its core ideological premises and the support of its more radical constituency. Finding a balance between these two imperatives appears even more complicated in light of the pressure exerted by the radical factions within Gaza.

Notes

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