

# THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Analysis

## Is Hamas really ISIS?

**Netanyahu insists it is. In fact, there are key similarities and differences between the two terror groups, as well as costs and benefits to the comparison**

By [Lazar Berman](#) August 27, 2014, 4:54 pm



Palestinian gunmen ride motorcycles as they drag the body of a man who was killed as a suspected collaborator with Israel, in Gaza City, November 20, 2012 (photo credit: AP/Hatem Moussa)

Israel has finally achieved a long-term ceasefire with its adversary in Gaza. But was agreeing to the truce tantamount to cutting a deal with the brutal killers of the Islamic State?

According to the new line the Israeli government has been pushing intensely, the answer is yes, for all intents and purposes: “Hamas is ISIS, and ISIS is Hamas.”

“They’re branches of the same tree,” said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last Wednesday after the Islamic State released a video of one of its members beheading American journalist James Foley. “We face the same savagery. People who wantonly rocket our cities and want to conduct mass killings. And when they can, they murder children, teenagers, shoot them in the head. Throw people from the sixth floor, their own people.

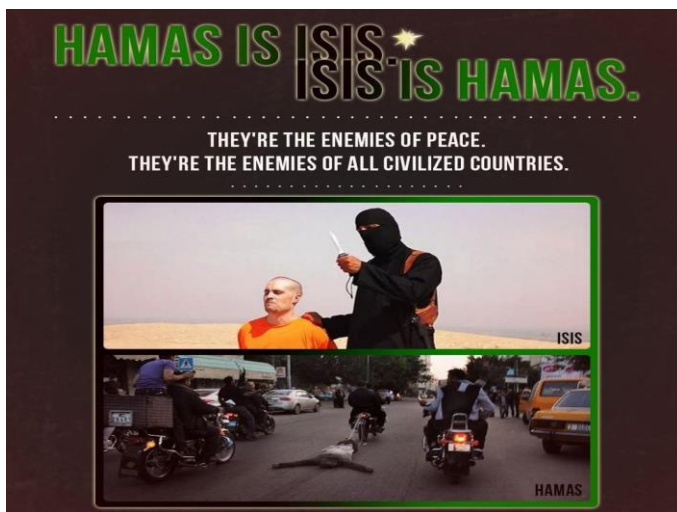
“Hamas is ISIS, ISIS is Hamas. They’re the enemies of peace, they’re the enemies of Israel, they’re the enemies of all civilized countries. And I believe they’re the enemies of the Palestinians themselves,” he added, using one of several acronyms associated with the group.

The Foreign Ministry drove home the same message. On Tuesday, it posted a video on its Facebook page showing IS killing Iraqi soldiers juxtaposed with images of Hamas executing suspected collaborators and dragging bodies through the streets. “You will find it hard to tell the difference between them, simply because there isn’t any difference between them: Hamas is ISIS and ISIS is Hamas.”

In a Chicago Tribune op-ed Sunday, Economy Minister Naftali Bennett wrote, “What the free world fails unfortunately to understand is that Israel’s conflict with Hamas and the current battle to stop ISIS’ advances in Syria and Iraq are one and the same.”

The PR benefits Israel would gain by conflating the two organizations are obvious, as it and Hamas jockey for every advantage on the field of public opinion as vigorously as they do on the battlefield.

But scholars agree that the message ignores key differences between Hamas and IS.



*An internet meme comparing Hamas to the Islamic State movement*

“The Islamic State and Hamas differ widely — so widely that claims that they are similar mislead more than they enlighten,” said Daniel Byman, counter-terrorism expert at The Brookings Institution and professor at Georgetown University. “Both, of course, favor an Islamist state and consider themselves religious organizations. Both oppose Israel.”

“Hamas, however, comes out of the Muslim Brotherhood tradition while IS is ‘Salafi-jihadist’ ... IS and Hamas differ on sources of interpretation for Islam, the role of politics, and the level of compromise,” Byman said.

Expounding on the differences, Scott Kleinmann, a terrorism expert at King’s College London, noted that “Hamas’s short-term strategy is to gain power by co-opting existing western political structures in furtherance of its ultimate objective. This political pragmatism required Hamas’s participation in elections and the relatively secular administration of Gaza.”

“Conversely, ISIS is uncompromising in its Salafi-jihadi ideology,” he said. “Their strategy stems from the belief that the only way to eternal salvation is to follow Quran and the examples of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions—waging war to establish the Caliphate and implementing strict sharia law is necessary to fulfill this divine duty. Any deviation from this path is an affront to the sovereignty of God over man.”

The Islamic State, he explained, would view Hamas’s participation in elections and implementation of man-made laws as “polytheistic innovations worthy of hellfire.” Al-Qaeda, the Salafi group of out which IS grew, has been highly critical of Hamas’s participation in elections. After releasing 12 statements criticizing Hamas, in 2007 Osama Bin Laden said the Palestinian group has “lost its religion,” according to Johns Hopkins’ Mary Habeck. His deputy’s criticism was equally sharp. “Doctrinal deviation has facilitates behavioral deviation.”

Another important distinction is the strong Palestinian-nationalist overtones in Hamas’s rhetoric that do not occur in IS’s dogma.

“ISIS rejects nationalism and believes all Muslims must fight for the whole global Islamic community or Ummah,” said Kleinmann.

“Hamas in Gaza is hardly a good or gentle government, but it is nothing near as brutal as IS or as harsh on those who disagree with it,” Byman added.

**Yoram Schweitzer**, senior research fellow at Israel’s **Institute for National Security Studies**, sees more similarities between the two organizations. “The core beliefs are not different. The strategy is different, the pace is different. Both of them are looking for eventually establishing an Islamic caliphate.”

But Hamas — and also al-Qaeda — are more pragmatic, **Schweitzer** argued.

“What characterizes IS is that they are looking for implementation right now. And very brutally. This is part of their strategy. Hamas is not implementing Sharia by force even when they took control of Gaza.”

Still, said **Schweitzer**, Hamas deals harshly with its enemies as well.

“When they are encountered with rivals like Salafi jihadists, and they defy their authority, they kill them instantly and very brutally. And when they encounter rivals like Fatah, they throw them off the roof,” he said, referring to one of the methods by which Hamas killed Fatah members during their 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip. “And when they find themselves under pressure, they execute people in Gaza without trial, most if not all of whom are innocent. There are methods and tactics being used that are similar, but there are differences as well.”

“Both of them indeed are terrorist organizations and brutal terrorist organizations. But there is a difference in style.”

Neither Kleinmann, Byman nor [Schweitzer](#) knew of any cooperation or contact between IS and Hamas. If Hamas was faced with IS members in Gaza who defied them, said [Schweitzer](#), “they will take care of them as they did the other salafi jihadist groups.”

“Hamas appears to reject ISIS’s extreme ideology,” said Kleinmann. “Last week Hamas’s Khaled Mashaal condemned ISIS’s indiscriminate killings, rejecting any comparison between the two groups. “

The US State Department was hardly entertaining the comparison either.

“I think by definition, they are two different groups. They have different leadership, and I’m not going to compare them in that way,” said spokeswoman Marie Harf. “I’ll let [Netanyahu] speak for himself, but I’m not going to use that comparison.”

Israeli leaders are not naïve, and are doubtless aware of the many differences between the groups. So why double down on the comparison?

“It was a decision of opportunity” once Hamas began executing Palestinians in the streets of Gaza, according to [Schweitzer](#). “It was too tempting to refrain from it. And there are indeed characteristics that are similar between brutal terrorist groups everywhere. On the other hand the dissimilarities are quite obvious.”

Still, Israel has to be pleased that the comparison has forced commentators to discuss Hamas and IS in the same breath — even if distinctions are emphasized.

The comparison has spread to Arab commentators as well. In the Iraqi Daily al-Mada, Adad Hussein wrote, according to a MEMRI translation, “what Hamas recently did in Gaza to those whom it accused of spying for Israel is just as debased as the deeds of ISIS.”

But the PR line might cost Israel on the policy level. Byman argued that Israeli leaders might be blinded to opportunities if they buy into the Hamas is IS comparison too deeply.

“The IS equals Hamas view of things misses Hamas’s pragmatism,” he said. “It is a violent organization, and some leaders are committed to Israel’s destruction. But it can also be coerced and deterred, unlike IS. You can negotiate with it (as Israel has repeatedly done), unlike IS. Conflating the two risks missing opportunities regarding deterring Hamas or cutting a deal while understanding IS’s evil and fanaticism.”

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