

Hamas, the PLO, and Terrorist Attacks Against Israel

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Last December, Hamas held its annual rally in a Gaza stadium. More than 70,000 people—an overflow audience—attended. As Hamas leaders took the podium one after another, making incendiary speeches against the peace accords and calling for *jihad* against the Jews, the fervor of the crowd mounted. Cries of “*Allahu Akbar!* [God is great]” and “*Mawt lil-Yahud!* [Death to the Jews]” greeted the speakers’ chants. But the most meaningful moment of the rally was neither a chant nor a cry. It was a silent procession of a few dozen young men dressed in white shrouds. They looked like ghosts set against the huge crowd. They were future suicide bombers who had vowed to end their lives in a larger effort to kill as many Jews as possible.

Although to this writer’s knowledge no public opinion polls have been recorded of the support for suicide bombers within Palestinian society, the huge turnouts for Hamas and Islamic Jihad rallies do tell us something. In January, more than 100,000 people amassed for the funeral of Yehya Ayyash, the notorious bombmaker who killed dozens of Israelis and Palestinians. Hamas newspapers regularly applaud their “holy” missions. The Friday sermons include prayers for their divine reward.

The boys in these white vestments at the December Gaza Hamas rally were not simply dregs of society, recruited only from the impoverished quarters of decrepit refugee camps. According to intelligence reports, several of those who volunteered for suicide missions were from middle class backgrounds. Palestinian Islamist society brought up these boys to be shipped off to their untimely deaths. No matter how much bomb detecting technology President Clinton ships to Israel, there is simply no way of stopping them.

Western analysts prefer to describe the presence of a fanatical ideology among sectors of Palestinian society as a stubborn relic of a sore that was being erased faster than its symptoms. The annual Hamas celebration of death in Gaza, as well as half a dozen similar ones held during the previous year, did not elicit any special attention—nor did they provide cause for American executive branch policymakers to reconsider a laissez-faire attitude to Arafat that was basically adopted since the beginning of the Oslo Accords.

As President Clinton seeks to resurrect the peace process, he may be attempting to initiate a jump start prematurely. It is clearly too early to draw any conclusions, tentative or otherwise, about whether the peace process will survive at this time. Yes, there is no doubt that Arafat is now engaged in an aggressive effort to shut down and arrest some of the main purveyors of the fanatical terrorism that has engulfed Israel. But for the Israeli public, which has endured some 200 killed and 700 wounded in the 30 months since the Oslo Accords—versus 70 killed and 390 during the 30 months before the accords—Arafat’s response may simply be too late.

As we sit here today, staring down into a frightening abyss created by the carnage of the past several weeks, it is worth noting how just a few weeks ago, American policy makers had given briefings extolling the revolutionary progress and irreversible positive changes in the Middle East. But four suicide bus bombings have suddenly turned the Middle East upside down. Now the question is no longer what a peace agreement will look like in the future but rather whether there can be peace at all. If Arafat cannot deliver security, then what? It is no longer simply limited to a Solomonic question of physically dividing up the land and forcing a divorce between Israelis and Palestinians. Rather, we are now compelled to entertain the horrific notion that there may be no way out; that Israel and the Palestinians may be hopelessly irreconcilable, locked in a duel to the end in which only one can survive.

The premise behind the calculated risks Israel took for peace were sound in 1993; in exchange for genuine security, Israel would surrender territorial and physical control of 1.5 million

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Palestinians back to the Palestinians themselves. For the first time in their tragic history, the Palestinians would have an opportunity to assume full control over their own lives and ultimately establish independence.

But this magical formula, nurtured in large part by the emotions of hope, courage and optimism, never took hold. Absent traditional rigorous Israeli inspection and intensive anti-terrorism monitoring of Palestinian territories, the new era of Palestinian self-rule resulted in a proliferation of virtually unlimited weapons, explosives, terrorist training and recruitment throughout Gaza. Because Palestinian police failed to impose

any real arms control, and in some cases even facilitated their acquisition, tens of thousands of smuggled automatic weapons, grenades, land mines, and even rocket-propelled grenades suddenly flowed into Gaza. More ominously, fresh stocks of high tech explosives and concentrate, including exceptionally powerful plastic and synthetic TNT, became available at the street level.

Although Arafat did succeed in repressing nearly all terrorist attacks on Israelis by his Fatah forces, the PLO leader, lacking either the willingness or the capability, did not attempt to stop the growth and revitalization of the Palestinian Islamist movement, embodied in the Hamas and Islamic Jihad organizations.

Although some pundits have claimed that during this time Arafat was sincerely trying to co-opt Hamas, attempting to lure the “moderate” wing from the “extremists,” the unvarnished reality is that Arafat had simply turned a blind eye to the operations and activities of the Islamic militants. Effectively, the deal was: Don’t embarrass me too much, and I won’t lean on you. And in his public exhortations, Arafat embraced the symbols of Jihad and terrorism rather than disavowing them. To be sure, the requirement that Arafat undergo a comprehensive political conversion, both internally and externally, proved a more difficult challenge to him than to his Israeli counterparts. The Palestinian demonization of Israelis, contrary to the conventional wisdom of so many pundits, turned out to be much more ingrained than any Israeli demonization of Palestinians.

Still, the question must be asked as to whether Arafat really made the effort required of him to effect the change. When the first Islamic terrorist executions of Israelis occurred within weeks of the Oslo Accords signing, Arafat quickly discovered that trying to stop the Hamas death squads would prove considerably more troublesome than the temporary wrath he incurred from his Israeli partners. As long as the level of terrorism against Israeli targets by the Hamas and Islamic Jihad was kept at “manageable levels,” Arafat would not be forced to confront members of his society. Now, he must essentially adopt the path of least resistance, appealing to the lowest common denominator—a reprise of his managerial success in retaining his leadership over all of the disparate PLO groups for so many years.

When the deadly attacks against Israelis finally provoked the demand that Arafat take action, his response was perversely similar to the gendarme in Casablanca who would round up the “usual suspects,” only to release them hours or days later. In fact, of the hundreds of “arrests” of terrorists and militants boldly announced by Arafat during the past two years and dutifully reported by the media, nearly every single one ended in release.

In some cases, however, Arafat would not only arrest the “suspect” but actually arrange a midnight tribunal to convict and sentence the suspect in a court proceeding hastily convened on several hours notice—thus circumventing the legal requirement under the peace agreement that all untried terrorist fugitives be turned over to Israeli authorities. Yet even those convicted and

publicly sentenced to prison terms ranging between ten and twenty years were quietly released days or weeks later.

Once under Palestinian control, Hamas and Islamic Jihad were free to carry out training with virtual impunity. Throughout Gaza, even in citrus groves only a few kilometers from the border with Israel, Hamas set up makeshift training camps where its Iz ad-Din al-Qassam squads practiced with live fire and hand grenades. At other locations in Gaza, Hamas fighters recruited newly appointed members of the Palestinian Police force into their ranks, raising the distinctly uncomfortable proposition that should Arafat ever order his troops to crack down on Hamas, a certain percentage (anywhere from two to seven, according to several Israeli military estimates) might elect to fight on the other side.

On more than seven occasions since 1994, Arafat and his senior police officials issued public demands that all unregistered weapons be turned in by a certain date. With the exception of the latest round of weapons confiscations during the past week, the total number of weapons turned in to or confiscated by the Palestinian police force during the past two years amounted, according to Israeli military intelligence estimates, to less than one dozen.

As President Clinton convenes an anti-terrorist summit in Egypt to reverse some of the diplomatic fallout from the terrorist attacks, it would be wrong to assume that the Hamas terrorist threat can be tackled by a military approach alone or that the problem is limited to the Israeli-Palestinian frontier. Hamas is a vast social-political-military movement that encompasses a system of ideological beliefs built around an array of social, political, religious and military institutions. Although analysts are always trying to gauge the level of popular support for Hamas through municipal elections or simply voter turnout, an undeniable fact remains that the dominant Palestinian infrastructure of mosques, religious schools and seminaries, hospitals and health clinics, are still thoroughly imbued with an ideological-religious zeal dedicated to the beliefs of Hamas.

History and Development

Hamas, the dominant Islamist movement in Palestine, deserves credit for this transformation of Palestinian society. It is a potent and dangerous threat to the very fabric of Palestinian society, and ultimately Israeli society as well. But Islamism cannot be seen as an isolated movement

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treatable with a local cure when, in fact, it is part of a global movement bent on uprooting existing regimes in the Middle East and replacing them with Islamist regimes. Born as the Palestinian offspring of the international Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas began as the Brotherhood's vehicle to combat Is-

raeli occupation in the outbreak of the *intifadah*. But it swiftly expanded, aspiring to drive the Jews out of all parts of Palestine, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, and replace the Zionist state with a Muslim theocracy. This transformation would require not only a violent upheaval targeting Jews, Christians, and secularist Muslims, but also a revolution in Muslim society. To this end, Hamas established a network of institutions to serve Palestinians in all walks of life: schools for children, Islamic universities, newspapers, mobile health units, youth clubs, academic research institutions, and charitable organizations, along with mosque readerships and existing Islamic welfare committees.

Each of these institutions became a vehicle for Hamas ideology indoctrination—to oppose secularism, to fight the cultural onslaught of the West, and above all, to wage military *jihad* against the enemies of Allah. It is these institutions that breed the violence and engineer public consent for terrorism within Palestinian society. “Engineers are a dime a dozen,” says Oliver “Buck” Revell, former head of FBI investigations. “It’s the ideologues that make the movement.”

Organization and Command Structure

A study of indictments and testimonies of Hamas military officials submitted to Israeli courts reveals how the Hamas leadership works. Ghassan Siyyam, who served as overall commander of Hamas in Gaza in late 1994, told a military prosecutor that his movement comprises four interdependent organizations, for which there is one supervisor:

1. The *da'wah* (Islamic call to God) apparatus functions as a greenhouse and selection apparatus for the recruitment of youths to Hamas, under the guise of religious activities in mosques. From this wing, military units select their recruits, as do the other wings of the organization.
2. The activities apparatus distributes Hamas communiques, writes pro-Hamas graffiti on the walls of houses and building, imposes general strike days, and carries out Hamas rallies, marches, and demonstrations. More than any other wing, this apparatus sets the ideological tone of the organization, determines Hamas policy, and ultimately makes decisions about organizational, political, and military strategy.
3. The security apparatus goes after those suspected of “collaborating” with Israel or otherwise opposing Hamas. Part of their responsibility is to interrogate accused collaborators and “traitors.”
4. The military apparatus, otherwise known as the brigades of Iz ad-Din al-Qassam, executes “convicted” collaborators, acquires weaponry and explosives, and above all, carries out violent operations against Jews and Palestinians deemed enemies.

Far from functioning independently, these four wings continuously feed off one another and cannot survive alone. Particularly vulnerable is the military apparatus, a disparate group of cells that receive their instructions from the political/activities branch of the movement for every type of decision, ranging from which torture methods to employ to whether or not to carry out specific suicide operations. Their manpower comes directly from young recruits in the mosques of the *da'wah* branch, and their ability to take credit for attacks requires the cooperation of the activities wing, who write and distribute Hamas communiqués. And they cannot guard their rear flank without regular reports submitted from the security apparatus.

The success of terror attacks carried out by the Qassam brigades in this era of suicide operations is testimony to the brigades' reliance on the political/activities branch, which continues to call the shots. Foreshadowing this spat of suicide attacks in Israel has been an outpouring of communiqués, sermons, Hamas newspaper articles, and rallies calling for suicide attacks. The official organ of the Hamas political wing, a Gaza newspaper called *al-Watan*, ran an article in November 1995 entitled "Suicide Operations: Examples from the Biography of the Prophet." It is a collection of oral traditions of the prophet Muhammad legislating the virtue of dying in battle. With sub-headings like "The Place of a Martyr is Lofty" and "A New Definition for Death," the article and others like it give an unambiguous cue to all bomb-toters in Hamas's ranks. Citing one oral tradition, the article lists the seven rewards granted by Allah to suicide bombers: "He is forgiven [for all his sins] with his first drop of blood, and he sees his place in paradise, and he is adorned in the vestments of faith, and he is married off to 72 women with the most beautiful eyes, and he is spared the suffering of the grave, and he is saved from the great horror, and the crown of glory is placed on his head, of a sapphire greater than any of this world, and he is joined with 70 members of his family..." The article further assures that suicide bombers are part of a long historical tradition: "Verily the blood of martyrs is heavy in the scales of Allah the almighty, and therefore he gives them these special characteristics and he gives them preference over others, and it has been proven that history is not recorded in its span except by the blood of these exemplars of martyrs, except by their stories and annals, and it is through such people that nations are built. And the principles are brought to life, and the beliefs prevail."

Similarly, in the international Hamas magazine *Falastin al-Muslimah*, published out of London, a two-part series was devoted to supporting suicide bombings. The first printed hearty endorsements of Hamas leaders, and the second sourced oral traditions of the prophet Muhammad exalting suicide operations.

The ideological reinforcement, provided by the political wing, is invaluable to the Qassam Brigades. To paraphrase Mao, it is the sea in which Qassam's fish swim.

As for the recruitment process, the *da'wah* wing revealed its prominence last week as well. GSS chief Ami Ayalon reported to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that there

are hundreds of youths “waiting in line” to commit suicide attacks for Hamas. Two of the suicide bombers involved in recent attacks on Jerusalem and Ashkelon, he said, had studied at the mosque in the al-Fawar refugee camp just south of Hebron. This camp of 6,000 residents today harbors between 30 and 40 youths between the ages of 15 and 20 willing to commit a suicide attack. Last week’s attackers were themselves encouraged to join the brigades by Mustafa Abu-Wardeh, who studied at the Teachers Seminary in Ramallah, another Hamas *da’wah* stronghold.

PLO-Hamas Accords

The PLO and Hamas have arrived at a series of agreements through high-level meetings in Khartoum and several well-publicized subsequent gatherings in Gaza. Acting Palestine National Council head Salim Za’anun and Hamas diplomat Khalid Mash’al publicized the essence of their accords last December, which amounted to a Hamas agreement not to attack the Palestine Authority itself, while committing to escalated attacks on Israel with PLO endorsement. “Regarding the questions of elections and the PA’s committee,” according to the report, “they agree that Hamas maintains its positions: first, not forcing anyone to boycott the elections, and second, that Hamas does not aim at embarrassing the authority.”

In essence, this ambiguous agreement stipulated that Hamas would refrain from attacking Israeli targets in self-rule area A but continue to strike in areas B and C, as well as in Israel itself. A more disturbing account of a PLO-Hamas dialogue, written by Israeli national security correspondent Ze’ev Schiff, surfaced this past week on the front pages of respected Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*. Schiff reported that the head of Gaza security for the PLO, Muhammad Dahlan, was meeting regularly with Qassam bomb brigades chief Muhammad Deif throughout the series of four suicide bombings. After the first bombing, Israel had urged that he be arrested, but the PLO authorities neglected to do so. In fact, negotiations continued to proceed during the next three bombings.

Demonstrations of the Political/Activities Wing

Rallies of Hamas have continued. Besides the rally of 70,000 in Gaza noted earlier, there have been a series of others. Shortly after the apprehension and murder of Israeli Nakhshon Waxman in 1994, students at the Islamic University in Gaza staged a live reenactment of the killing. Waxman was portrayed as screaming, “*Imma, Imma!* [Mama, Mama!]” as he was being killed. A large audience cheered and shouted “*Allahu Akbar!*”

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December 16 saw the debut performance of a live reenactment of Rabin's assassination at the Islamic University in Gaza. This widely attended event drew cheers of enthusiasm from its audience.

In Qalqilya on 15 February, Hamas activists staged a live reenactment of the October 1994 suicide bombing of the bus on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv.

Hamas Leadership Inside and Outside Palestine

Americans have to contend with the problem of Hamas and its radicalism, not only because we support the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, but also because our country is one of the main havens for the leadership, political activity, fundraising, and strategic planning of Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad outside Palestine. Last July, we saw the arrest and detention in New York of Hamas political bureau chief Mousa Abu Marzuk, who lived and ran his operation in the United States for fifteen years. And after the assassination of Palestinian Islamic Jihad chief Fat'hi Shiqaqi in Malta last October, Americans were dumbfounded to see a professor at the University of South Florida, Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, fly to Lebanon to take his place, calling for escalated attacks on Americans and Israelis. These two incidents are only the tip of the iceberg.

Hamas in the Larger Islamic Militant Fundamentalist Constellation

As one of the multiple Islamic offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas' ideological siblings have established Islamic fundamentalist movements and networks throughout the world. Although their motivation and national characters are in large part shaped by local factors, the disparate Islamic fundamentalist movements are all linked by a mutual belief in the need to apply the Sha'ariah, the Islamic code of law, to society. The roots of each movement go back to the same teachers and leaders of Islamic fundamentalism in the 40's, 50's, and 60's. As noted by writer Jamal Kashoggi in this week's *al-Watan*, the "books they read are generally the same that are used to educate recruits to Islamist movements elsewhere, such as the works of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna and other Islamic revivalists like Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid and Abdelkarim Zeidan."

Although uniquely different political factors in each of their respective countries may affect their behavior, Islamic groups are united by a continuous network in which each group assists the other.

In trying to contain the threat posed by Hamas, it is important to note that Hamas is not only a resilient organization but that it is willing to adopt pragmatic compromises when its viability is threatened. Following the bombings in Israel, several well known Hamas officials, includ-

ing Mahmud al-Zohar, issued statements offering conditional cease-fires to the Israelis and called upon the Hamas military wing to stop its bombing campaign. This, in turn, led some to believe that perhaps there really was a deep ideological split in Hamas between a “moderate” and “militant” wing.

In fact, the split, to the extent it really exists, is simply over the timing of tactics. There is no such thing as a moderate Hamas official. A similar mistake was made several years ago during the Iran arms scandal when American policy-makers confused Iranian pragmatism with Iranian moderation.

If anything should become even more apparent by the statements made by the Hamas political and religious officials, it is that they actually control the activities of the Qassam death squads. Although the political and religious officials assiduously cultivate an image of being thoroughly disconnected and unaware of any military activities, the multiple independent confessions of several Hamas terrorists and couriers arrested by Israel in the last few years show that senior Hamas religious officials actually direct terrorist operations. The confession, for example, of Nasser Jallal Hidmi, a Palestinian recruited in the U.S. to carry out terrorist operations against the Israelis, shows that the people who organized and trained him were the leaders of the Holy Land Foundation, a U.S. based “charity” that supplies millions of dollars to Hamas institutions in Palestine.

The Hamas network now stretches throughout five continents with offices, charities and poorly disguised front groups not only throughout the U.S. but in Brazil, South Africa, Malaysia, Germany, England, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Iran, Sudan, and even Australia. Although Iran continues to provide assistance to Hamas, it no longer serves as its pivotal center for funds and weapons; Hamas now has diversified its sources of funding and has greatly expanded its international recruitment and propaganda operations. Even more important, Hamas has established close working and collaborative relationships with virtually every member of the radical Islamic fundamentalist network which, in turn, has established its presence throughout the world.

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In short, the rise of Hamas is only emblematic of the general rise of radical Islamic groups in the Middle East and, more importantly, in the heart of the West itself.

