

## Hamas, Al-Qaeda and the Islamisation of the Palestinian Cause (ARI)

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**Theme:** Under Hamas's rule, a radical Islamic entity has been established in Gaza, opposed to the national-secular Fatah movement, and pro al-Qaida groups have started to emerge and carry out attacks against western targets in the Strip.

**Summary:** Hamas's take-over of the Gaza Strip has led to the establishment of a radical Islamic entity that practices terrorism to achieve its goals and that has close connections with the 'Muslim Brotherhood' in Egypt (whose Palestinian branch is Hamas) and Iran, the radical Islamic Shiite state. Hamas is challenging and threatening the Palestinians' secular nationalist territorial aims and striving to implement its Pan-Islamic religious ideology in accordance with the idea of the Islamic *Ummah* (the seamless nation of Islam). This entity is now in violent conflict with Abu Mazen, Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, who represents the national-secular Fatah movement. Due to this, Abu Mazen and official Palestinian and Egyptian media use terms such as 'Islamic Emirate' when describing the new entity that has been established in the Gaza Strip. Under Hamas's rule in Gaza, organisations identified with the global Jihad have started to emerge and carry out attacks against western targets in the Gaza Strip. These radical entities form a new pro-al-Qaeda and global-Jihad-oriented conglomerate that operates in the Gaza Strip with no interference from Hamas, that considers them a spearhead committed to maintaining the 'flame' of Jihad against Israel and 'purifying' Palestinian society from the West's presence and influence. Hamas's activities make it evident that its strategic objective within the Palestinian arena is to take over and replace the PLO in the leadership of the Palestinian National Movement.

**Key words:** Islam, Hamas, PLO, Palestinian Authority, Fatah, Abu Mazen, Muhammad Dahlan, Jaljalat, Gaza, al-Qaeda, Army of Islam, Jihad, Army of the believers-al-Qaeda in Palestine, Mujahideen battalions, Army of the Ummah-Jerusalem, Fatah al-Islam in the Land of Ribat, Abu Rish Brigades-Sword of Islam, Jerusalem Jihad Warriors

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**Analysis:** The London-based Arabic daily newspaper *Al-Hayat* has published an extensive interview with Muhammad Dahlan, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and of the Revolutionary Council of the Fatah Movement and formerly head of the Palestinian Preventative Security Force in the Gaza Strip and Arafat's protégée. The interview comprised four segments published between 30 August and 2 September 2008 on the newspaper's website.<sup>1</sup> In the first segment, Dahlan claims that '... there is no difference between Hamas, interested in establishing an Islamic Emirate in Gaza, and Al-Qaeda'.<sup>2</sup> According to Dahlan, there is no certainty whether the decision to take over Gaza was arrived at by Hamas alone or with the aid of outside actors, but the result, according to him, is clear: Hamas intends to establish an Islamic Emirate in the Gaza Strip.

Dahlan goes on to say that Hamas is actively working to implement such a plan, which is more than just a general aim or aspiration: 'This isn't just a plan, it is already being implemented. They [Hamas] are firing judges and teachers and appointing in their stead others, on their behalf. They are taking over non-governmental establishments even if they are not connected to Fatah. [Hamas] said they have problems with Dahlan and his people, and later on attacked members of the Executive Force and members of the Central Committee and have arrested Dr Zachariah Al-Agha. Later on they attacked all Fatah members who actually identified with Hamas, banished them from their houses and destroyed them... They attacked [members] of Islamic Jihad and confiscated their weapons, closed down the Popular Front's broadcasting station...'.<sup>3</sup>

Dahlan has noted al-Qaeda's influence in the Gaza Strip and claimed that the conditions and the environment there are conducive to its enhancement. He claims the Gaza Strip is in a state of chaos and brimming with weaponry. The appearance of Hamas has led to a loss of vision and strategy in Gaza among all other forces active there, producing an environment that is suitable for al-Qaeda. Dahlan concludes: 'as far as I am concerned, there is no difference between Hamas and al-Qaeda. They are all the same'.<sup>4</sup>

In his eyes, Hamas will not prevent al-Qaeda's entry to the Gaza Strip, as claimed by Hamas's leader in Damascus Haled Masha'al. Dahlan says that Hamas, as a radical Islamic Palestinian organisation, cannot be a source of national Palestinian pride since under its rule in Gaza it has murdered 600 people a year, injured around 2,500, crippled 800 to 900 and made thousands of arrests. Dahlan says this Islamic model 'has no connection with Islam in its tolerant' aspect.<sup>5</sup>

Based on Dahlan's statements and an analysis of Hamas's activities since its inception in 1987, it is evident that the organisation's strategic objective is to take over and replace the PLO as the leader of the Palestinian National Movement. To further that end, Hamas aims to take over the PLO and its institutions, including the Palestinian Authority's governmental, security and civil apparatus established in 1994 as a result of the implementation of the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the PLO. The latter was recognised by Israel for the first time, under the patronage of the international community, as the 'sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'. Following the success of

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.daralhayat.com/special/dialogues/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.daralhayat.com/special/dialogues/08-2008/Item-20080829-0f7cf21e-c0a8-10ed-01bf-ee336cd96a38/story.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.daralhayat.com/special/dialogues/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Hamas's military take-over of the Palestinian Authority's security organisation in Gaza in the summer of 2007, its full take-over of the Gaza Strip was completed in the summer of 2008 with two additional moves against the civil system. It took control of the education and health systems, establishing a new reality on the ground, to the surprise of the rest of the world.

#### *Hamas's 'Islamic Emirate'*

On 20 June 2007, about a week after Hamas completed its take-over of the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority's President, Abu Mazen, delivered an emotional and angry speech to the PLO's Central Committee in Ramallah. Abu Mazen emphasised that establishing an 'Islamic Emirate' under the control of Hamas in the Gaza Strip had no legitimacy and no roots in Islam. According to him, 'it is a struggle between the [Palestinian] national project and the project of the militias, between the Homeland project and the 'Emirate' project or the fake country...'. Abu Mazen said that 'there is no dialogue with these murderous conspirators... and there is no choice but to end the revolution on all its aspects and phenomena...'<sup>6</sup>

In this context, it is relevant to cite Abu Mazen's speech of January 2007 regarding the legality of Palestinian representation, in which he claimed that after Hamas won the elections to the Legislative Council all organisations refused to participate in its government 'as Hamas has refused to recognise the PLO who is the political backup and the source of the Palestinian Authority rule'. According to Abu Mazen, when he advised Hamas to honour prior commitments and agreements, it refused to do so.<sup>7</sup> Around eight months after Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in a successful, short and violent military coup, in an interview to the daily paper *Al-Hayat* on 27 February 2008, Abu Mazen warned that elements of al-Qaeda were in Gaza operating with Hamas's knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

With Hamas's take-over of the Gaza Strip, a radical Islamic entity was established that used terrorism to achieve its goals and had close connections with the 'Muslim Brotherhood' in Egypt (whose Palestinian branch is Hamas) and with Iran, the radical Islamic Shiite state. During its take-over, Hamas proclaimed its support for Islamic rule and its faith in victory over the infidels. It found itself immediately in violent conflict with Abu Mazen, the Chairman of the 'Palestinian Authority' that represents the national-secular Fatah movement. Abu Mazen and official Palestinian and Egyptian media began using terms such as 'Islamic Emirate' when describing the new entity established in the Gaza Strip.

The term 'Islamic Emirate' has a distinct negative connotation in the modern history of Islam. The term refers to a small territory ruled by an Emir (leader) of a fanatic Islamic cult that attempts to impose a radical form of Islam. Most Islamic organisations and groups that were active (and still are) in Egypt and other Muslim/Arabic countries wanted to establish emirates ruled by Islamic law. Examples are the al-Qaeda organisation that promotes the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Iraq, the Fatah Al-Islam organisation in Lebanon, the Islamic militias of the Shari courts in Somalia and Jihad groups in Egypt.

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Jazeera, 20/VI/2007.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Hiyat Al-Jedida, 9/II/2007.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.daralhayat.com/arab\\_news/levant\\_news/02-2008/Item-20080226-5773fc52-c0a8-10ed-017c-4324294e94c0/story.html](http://www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/levant_news/02-2008/Item-20080226-5773fc52-c0a8-10ed-017c-4324294e94c0/story.html).

At the end of August 2008 the crisis between Fatah and Hamas had reached the Palestinian Authority's schools on the Gaza Strip. With the opening of the school year at the beginning of September 2008, the Hamas government removed by force many of the teachers and principals who belonged to Fatah. In response, Fatah's teachers' union went on strike and refused to teach at the schools. Hamas, apparently prepared for this scenario, appointed 2,000 new teachers who were politically inclined towards Hamas and who had just graduated a few months before. The teachers supporting Fatah were afraid to break the strike and return to their posts due to threats from the union in Ramallah that they would not receive their salary if they did so. At the same time, the Hamas police raided the offices of the Palestinian Teachers' Union –identified with Fatah– in the Gaza Strip and took them over. In addition, the police arrested dozens of teachers sympathetic to Fatah for questioning and released them after several hours in detention.

Before that, on 24 August 2008, around half the teachers in Gaza announced a strike due to discrimination in their employment by the Palestinian Ministry of Education in Gaza, controlled by Hamas. They claimed that teachers supporting Fatah were transferred from the schools they were teaching and substituted by teachers who supported Hamas in order to reduce the organisation's influence in Gaza. The Deputy Minister of Education, Muhammad Shkair rejected their claims and said that the teachers were transferred for 'technical and managerial' reasons.<sup>9</sup>

Hamas's take-over of the educational system in the Gaza Strip proves the importance it has for its process of 'Islamisation' and in allocating resources and personnel to mould the new Palestinian society in Gaza. The educational system employs thousands of people and requires substantial current funding for the payment of salaries and the maintenance of educational structures.<sup>10</sup>

According to Dahlan, Hamas is a hostage of Iran and this is something that its activists do not conceal, claiming that the Palestinian Authority and Fatah are allies of the US and that such an alliance is prejudicial to Palestine. Hamas and Iran, with the aid of Syria, have an interest in establishing a countering force. Iran –and Syria to a lesser degree– participates in Hamas's decision-making process in Gaza and has a presence in its headquarters in Damascus, but not on the West Bank. Iran is motivated by its own interests and is therefore involved in expanding its influence in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine through financial support, weapons, explosives, operational knowledge and training.

#### *Processes of Islamisation and Radicalisation in the Gaza Strip*

Hamas has never deviated from the ideas expressed in its covenant: it strongly rejects the Jewish right to self-determination and calls for the establishment of a Palestinian-Islamic state on the entire land of 'Palestine'. After Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip (in August 2005) a new reality emerged, which accelerated the establishment of Hamas's distinct area of control in the Gaza Strip. Hamas was clever enough to use its growing power to strengthen its position in the Palestinian political arena. In the elections for the Legislative Council (in January 2006) it took a majority of votes and formed a government in March 2006. Later, in June 2006, it took over the Gaza Strip by force, neutralising Fatah's military and political power and the Palestinian security mechanisms and established a radical Islamic entity. This entity is supported by Iran and Syria, has its own

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<http://www.haaretz.com/hasite/pages/ShArtPE.jhtml?itemNo=1016741&contrassID=2&subContrassID=21&sbSubContrassID=0>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3586971,00.html>.

internal and foreign policies, runs a campaign of terrorism against Israel and is separate from the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, led by Abu Mazen and Fatah.

Hamas's take-over of the Gaza Strip in mid June 2007 has led to the creation of a radical Islamic political entity, with the makings of a sovereign country. This entity is controlled by Hamas, a movement with a radical Islamic ideology that it aims to impose on the general Palestinian population over and above the standard Islamic social codes in daily life through its control of the social, educational and religious system. The population is being forced to adopt a stricter religious Islamic line as a public expression of its total loyalty to the Hamas government, and this has given rise to a growing divergence between the Gaza Strip ruled by Hamas and the West Bank ruled by the national-secular Abu Mazen and Fatah.

#### *The 'Jaljalat' Groups in Gaza Global Jihad Phenomenon*

Hamas's rule in Gaza has seen the appearance of organisations linked to the global Jihad that have started to carry out attacks against western interests in the Gaza Strip.

Since 2005 a new radical Islamic stream has emerged, largely made up of Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives who are disillusioned with what they consider Hamas's overly 'pragmatic' attitude that has made it deviate from and betray the Jihad. This radical entity, bearing the Arabic Islamic name *Jaljalat* ('rolling thunder', 'peal'),<sup>11</sup> favours al-Qaeda and the global Jihad and operates in the Gaza Strip with no interference from the Hamas government. Its aim is to maintain the 'flame' of Jihad against Israel and to 'purify' Palestinian society from the West's presence and influence. The radical Islamic organisations linked to the *Jaljalat* have names drawn from Islamic narratives and myths which leave no doubt as to their nature: 'The Army of the believers-Al Qaeda in Palestine', 'The Army of Islam', 'The Mujahideen Battalions', 'The Army of the Ummah-Jerusalem', 'Fatah al-Islam in the Land of Ribat', 'Abu Rish Brigades – Sword of Islam', 'The Jerusalem Jihad Warriors movement' and others that are less well known.

The radical global Jihad-oriented groups in Gaza have adopted the idioms and motifs used by other similar Jihadi groups identified or affiliated with al-Qaeda (eh, the 'thunder' and 'lightning' motif is based on the Qur'an):<sup>12</sup>

'He (God) it is who shows you the lightning for fear and hope (of rain); and He brings up heavy clouds, and the *thunder* celebrates His praise; and the angels, too, fear him, and He sends the thunder-clap and. overtakes there-with whom He will; yet they wrangle about God! But He is strong in might'.

Its use in the Jihadi context reflects elements of divine power, violent revenge and the overwhelming superiority of Jihad in the name of Allah. Images of lighting, tornadoes and hurricanes suggest God's power, wrath and justice. Certain Jihadi groups may associate themselves with these symbols as a means of exaggerating their power and imply that they are acting on God's will. Thus, by using these symbols, Jihadi groups are able to represent themselves and their cause as extensions of divine power. Jihadi groups often use these motifs in reference to suicide bombers as an expression of their supreme motivation and power to execute the will of Allah.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Islamic peal will make the western world tremble'. See <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?t=107206> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EiXr2Rou3A&feature=related>.

<sup>12</sup> Surah xiii, 13, 14.

On 15 February 2008 an armed gang broke into the YMCA library in Gaza and blew it up. As a result the building was destroyed and thousands of books inside were burned. This was another attack on Christian western institutions and figures, carried out by one of the organisations of the global Jihad (probably the Army of Islam) flourishing in the Gaza Strip and that Hamas makes no attempt to control. Sources in the Gaza Strip reported that the explosion in the YMCA building was the responsibility of Mumtaz Dughmush, head of the Army of Islam, that decided to attack Christians in the Gaza Strip and thereby cause embarrassment to Hamas. The latter's security forces detained a number Army of Islam activists but they were released after a short while, following a threat by the Army of Islam that it would release its activists by force.

The 'Army of the Ummah-Jerusalem', established in the Gaza Strip in 2006, also considers all Muslims part of the Islamic nation, defines itself as a pure Islamic organisation and therefore rejects Palestinian nationalism. This group is yet another global jihad offshoot in the Gaza Strip.<sup>13</sup> Since the Hamas take-over there has been an increase in the propaganda and terrorist activities carried out by radical Islamic groups associated with al-Qaeda and the global jihad. In this they differ from Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Palestine, who have a Palestinian-Islamic approach that also embrace Palestinian national objectives.

'Fatah Al-Islam on the land of Ribat' claimed responsibility for shooting at the Yad Mordechai Kibbutz. It is a terrorist organization operating in Lebanon as a branch of the global Jihad. Its centre of power was the Nahar El-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon, from which it was expelled by the Lebanese army in September 2007. It has recently begun to claim responsibility for terrorist mortar and rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip.

Israeli targets are not the only ones for organisations identifying with the global Jihad in the Gaza Strip, since they also attack Western interests. For some time, organisations identified with the global Jihad have been attacking Internet cafes throughout the strip. In addition, during President Bush's visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority (9-11 January 2008) an organisation calling itself The Army of the Believers – The al-Qaeda Organisation in Palestine claimed responsibility for two attacks on the International American school in Gaza.<sup>14</sup>

#### *The Army of Islam (Jaish Al Islam)*

Hamas's rule in Gaza has been accompanied at all times by an unprecedented growth in its military power and the building up of an array of offensive and defensive weaponry.

In addition, there are several other terrorist organisations with a total of around 3,000 to 4,000 activists, whose cooperation is considered highly valuable by Hamas. Especially prominent is the operational cooperation between Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees and the Army of Islam.

According to Dahlan, the Army of Islam, led by Mumtaz Dughmush, is ideologically close to al-Qaeda but is not part of Hamas. However, he says that has used the 'Army of Islam' as its tool, employing it to carry out assassination and missions against the Palestinian

<sup>13</sup> Al-Ayyam, 12/1/2008.

<sup>14</sup> 'Testimony of Steven Emerson Before the United States House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence', 9/1/2008, p. 17, <http://intelligence.house.gov/Media/PDFS/Emerson040908.pdf>.

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Authority and its leadership in the Gaza Strip. The 'Army of Islam' is also involved in criminal activities and operates openly and publicly in cooperation with the Hamas regime in Gaza. Dahlan recounts that Dughmush led the Palestinian Preventative Security Force before the outbreak of the second Intifada, that gave birth to many factions, groups and interests and brought Hezbollah, Iran and Islamist organisations to Gaza.

The Army of Islam attracted public attention on 8 May 2007, about two weeks after the abduction of the British journalist Alan Johnston, when it published a tape announcing its responsibility for the abduction and presenting its demands. The Army of Islam's announcement included radical Islamic terminology as used by al-Qaeda and global Jihad entities identified as al-Qaeda supporters.

The Army of Islam has several dozen activists and its leader Dughmush belongs to a powerful clan in the Gaza Strip. A year ago he withdrew along with his group of supporters from the Popular Resistance Committees. In the past the Army of Islam had close connections with Hamas, at least in its early stages. Its activities are similar to those of other global Jihad organisations, abducting foreigners and attacking places of recreation in the Gaza Strip (such as Internet cafes) that it considers prejudicial to Islamic morality. It was one of the three organisations, along with Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees, to announce their responsibility for the abduction of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit (on 25 June 2006) and was also behind the abduction of two reporters from the US Fox News network.

As a local Palestinian organisation in the Gaza Strip with a radical Islamic orientation and ideology, the Army of Islam promotes global Jihad objectives that are not primarily Palestinian and whose scope extends beyond the Israel-Palestinian conflict, which is essentially national, ideological, secular and territorial. The rise of Hamas and other radical Islamic forces is giving the conflict a more marked fundamental Islamic religious cast, in large part thanks to the increased power and presence of Hamas in the Palestinian arena.

#### *Is Hamas a-Qaeda?*

Muhammad Dahlan is well aware of the fact that the achievements of the national Palestinian project are under direct threat of being expropriated by Hamas. The latter is striving to impose its Arab-Muslim ideology based on the Islamic *Ummah* (the borderless nation of Islam). According to Hamas, the liberation of Palestine is only one step on the road towards establishing a global Islamic Caliphate. This is the underlying cause of the struggle led by Hamas to undermine Fatah/PLO and which Dahlan considers a threat comparable to that posed by al-Qaeda, that also aims to overthrow moderate governments in Arab and Muslim countries.

Although Hamas is not al-Qaeda, it would be fair to consider it a local Palestinian movement that identifies itself with the radical Islamic concept of establishing an Islamic entity in Palestine in a first stage, to subsequently merge with other Islamic entities across the world.

Its ideological roots, political agenda and principles show a historical affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood movement as a worldwide organisation. This ideology aims to impose political and socio-cultural principles that are the same as those promoted by al-Qaeda. Hamas holds in high consideration the charismatic political Islamic scholar and

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philosopher Dr Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian from the village of Silat Al-Hartia on the West Bank (near Jenin), who also happened to be Osama Bin Laden's 'spiritual mentor'.<sup>15</sup>

Abdullah Azzam is still revered by supporters of the global Jihad around the world. His ideology and concepts greatly influenced Bin Laden and he is still a major source of inspiration for Hamas, which heavily emphasises his Palestinian identity. Another figure, Sheikh Yassin, was directly involved in the one documented case of operational crossover between Hamas and al-Qaeda. Nabil 'Ukal, a 27-year-old from the Jebaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip was a Hamas *Da'awa* activist undergoing religious instruction in Pakistan, where he was recruited in February 1998 for military training in al-Qaeda's camps in Afghanistan. In April of that year, upon completion of his al-Qaeda training, 'Ukal visited Yassin in Gaza. The sheikh appointed a go-between and provided 'Ukal with US\$5,000 to finance his terrorist cell in Gaza. Later, when 'Ukal and one of his recruits wanted to travel back to Pakistan and Afghanistan for additional training and meetings, Yassin provided another US\$5,000 and prepared a cover story for the Israeli authorities about medical treatment in Jordan. A month before his arrest by Israel in June 2000 'Ukal played host to Richard Reid, the 'shoe bomber,' in his home.<sup>16</sup>

Although Hamas's current operational activities focus on Israel and the 'territories', as a radical Islamic organisation it also expresses ambitions and identifies with the Islamic organisations active in other Jihad arenas around the world and with their actions and objectives (Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, etc).

Dahlan does not differentiate between al-Qaeda and Hamas. Both define themselves as worldwide movements, as detailed in the preface to the Hamas covenant: 'The Movement is but one squadron that should be supported by more and more squadrons from this vast Arab and Islamic world, until the enemy is vanquished and Allah's victory is realized'.<sup>17</sup> In the covenant's second chapter the universal character of the Muslim Brothers movement is emphasised and Hamas is explicitly recognised as part of it: 'The Islamic Resistance Movement is one of the wings of Moslem Brotherhood in Palestine. Muslim Brotherhood Movement is a universal organization, which constitutes the largest Islamic movement in modern times'.<sup>18</sup>

In this respect there is no important ideological or long-term strategic difference between Hamas and al-Qaeda, who both have the same long-term goal, although in the short term, and for tactical local operational considerations, they act on different levels and focus on different objectives. While al-Qaeda aims to realise its goals through global Jihad around the world, Hamas aims to reach its goals through a local Jihad within the territory of the Palestinian Authority and in the State of Israel.

At this stage and for various reasons Hamas is not interested in being identified as an organisation belonging or acting as part of al-Qaeda, although it does not oppose and turns a blind eye to the growing extremism inspired by global Jihad entities and extreme radical organisations who adopt al-Qaeda's ideology and its pattern of action in the new

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<sup>15</sup> Yoni Figchel, 'Sheikh Abdullah Azzam: Bin Laden's Spiritual Mentor', International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), 27/IX/2001.

<sup>16</sup> Yoni Figchel & Yael Shahrar, 'The Al-Qaida-Hizballah Connection', ICT, 26/II/2002, <http://212.150.54.123/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=425>.

<sup>17</sup> The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement, 18/VIII/1988, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



territories under its rule in the Gaza Strip. Hamas, for practical reasons, has distanced itself from the global Jihad and al-Qaeda, stressing its character as a local Palestinian organisation whose struggle is justified and needs the recognition of the international community. A full operational merger with al-Qaeda would be counterproductive and prejudicial to Hamas gaining internal Palestinian political and would jeopardise the political and funding support it receives from Muslim and Arab states. This tactical adjustment is often compensated by the use of radical Islamic rhetoric and motifs and symbols similar to al-Qaeda's. However, it should be pointed out that Hamas is still a radical Islamic movement which has much in common with al-Qaeda and that under its direct rule in Gaza a number of global Jihad groups are growing constantly.

In this connection, for a number of months Hamas has exchanged verbal criticism with Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's second-in-command, who has attacked it repeatedly for having abandoned the 'way of Jihad' and for having 'sold Palestine' for the comforts of government.<sup>19</sup> Speakers on behalf of Hamas have retorted that Al-Zawahiri's position stems from his ignorance regarding conditions in Palestine. They claim he encourages operational activists with Hamas to undermine the organisation's leadership with the aim of causing a rift in Hamas to provide al-Qaeda with access to Palestine. Hamas is currently reluctant to abandon its position as a local independent Palestinian movement and to join al-Qaeda, although it shares its ideology to a large extent.

The roots of the conflict between Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Hamas lie in the latter's victory at the Legislative Council elections on 25 January 2006. This was a political 'earthquake' not only in the internal Palestinian arena but also in the Middle East in general. For the first time in the history of the Middle East a terrorist organisation with radical Islamic Sunni characteristics identified ideologically with the global Jihad gained power through democratic elections. Hamas's rise to power forced it to deal unexpectedly with the day-to-day problems of governing and the responsibilities of maintaining and providing for the needs of its people, unlike al-Qaeda which does not have to run a country and has no obligations or the responsibility of acting with certain constraints. Hamas was forced to adopt a pragmatic approach (without abandoning the long-term radical Islamic ideology expressed in its covenant). In its effort to gain international recognition and legitimacy, Hamas restrained its terrorist activities, softened its extremist messages for a Western audience and agreed to include Fatah in the government in accordance with the 'Mecca Agreement'. This made Ayman Al-Zawahiri extremely angry not only on account of its content but also because it was signed in the holiest city of Islam and under the patronage of the Saudi regime, Bin Laden's mortal enemy.

It should be emphasised that despite Hamas's expressions of temporary pragmatism it has not abandoned its ideological principles and continues to view Palestine as a land dedicated to Islam, Israel as a state with no right to exist and violence and terrorism as strategies through which the whole of Palestine will be 'liberated'. Following its harsh criticism of Hamas, al-Qaeda has tried to 'stake a claim' in the Palestinian territories. In the Gaza Strip there are now several dozen activists identified ideologically with global Jihad and with its activities around the world. These activists are trying to build an operational terrorist infrastructure in Gaza under Hamas's rule, but separately from the latter's terrorist infrastructure.

At this stage there is no sure information that indicates a direct operational connection between Hamas and al-Qaeda beyond their ideological connection and the emergence of

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<sup>19</sup> Aljazeera TV, 11/III/2007.

small local organisations linked to the global Jihad ideology and with a similar *modus operandi* to al-Qaeda, mainly against western targets in the Gaza Strip. In that respect, since the summer of 2007, the Gaza Strip under Hamas's rule has become an armed radical Islamic stronghold and a haven for terrorists.

#### *Gaza as a Haven for Terrorists*

Since Hamas's took over power in Gaza in the summer of 2007 there has been a marked rise in violent terrorist organisations acting without hindrance in an environment of lawlessness in which they have the encouragement or tacit agreement of the authorities. Hamas's interests are served by these organisations as the 'flag bearers' of the authentic 'struggle' (*Mukawamah*). Hamas uses these radical Islamic elements to enhance its own status as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in the local arena and in the inter-Arab and Islamic arena against Israel.

Conditions in the Gaza Strip provide a comfortable environment conditions for the entry of global Jihad operators through the Egyptian border and for their growth. The Gaza Strip under the rule of Hamas has become a haven for organisations promoting the use of terror and producing propaganda in the name of global Jihad.

**Conclusion:** Al-Qaeda's interest in reviving the Jihad in Palestine and making it part of its global enterprise is evident in the numerous video and audio messages it has produced, especially since 2007. So far, however, al-Qaeda has not claimed to have established a presence in Palestine, nor has it acknowledged having direct ties to any of the self-proclaimed Jihadi groups that are currently active in the region, especially in Gaza. Moreover, despite its considerable efforts, al-Qaeda has apparently failed to convince Hamas –the ruling force in the Gaza Strip– to abandon its political agenda and to declare its loyalty and support for al-Qaeda.

Despite this, the words of Muhammad Dahlan –a member of the younger generation of Fatah leaders and a representative of the more pragmatic secular-nationalist faction of Palestinian society– reflect a growing concern over the erosion of the PLO's and Fatah's legitimacy in representing Palestinian interests under the Palestinian Authority established as a result of the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the PLO.

The Editor-in-Chief of the London-based Arabic daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, Tariq Alhomayed, warned that under Hamas's rule, Gaza was becoming like Afghanistan, a hotbed of poverty, violence and strife between armed factions.<sup>20</sup> Al-Homayed said: 'The transformation of the Gaza Strip into another Afghanistan is a future whose first casualty will be the Palestinians and their cause. This cause has been shattered by Hamas, whose members want to rule as they will, and are waiting for the world to accommodate them'. Homayed continued his sombre analysis accusing Hamas of being 'a very real danger to the Palestinian cause. They have already blown the chance of creating a Palestinian state by splitting off from the legitimate authority of Abu Mazen... we must take a decisive stand against Hamas, for a simple reason, the boat in which they are drilling holes will not only drown them, but will drown all of us, and we will all be the victims'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tariq Alhomayed, 'Gaza: Following Afghanistan's Footsteps', 6/X/2008. <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=14308>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*