

Al-Qaida – a challenge for Hamas?

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English summary

This report explores to what extent the phenomenon of al-Qaida has made an impact on the Palestinian political scene, focusing on the situation in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, where a myriad of small groups claiming adherence to salafi-jihadi ideology has been established during the past few years. Three aspects of the relationship between the Palestinian polity and the global network of al-Qaida are discussed. First, the report reviews the attempts by al-Qaida leaders to influence the Palestinian audience by the means of propaganda transmitted in the media. Second, it investigates indications of operational activities by al-Qaida inspired groups in the Palestinian territories. Third, the report analyses how Hamas has responded to the challenge of al-Qaida and to what extent the ideology of the latter has influenced the policies of Hamas itself.

The analysis is based on media reports, academic literature, and transcripts of messages posted by al-Qaida leaders and their Palestinian supporters on the Internet, as well as field work interviews with Hamas leaders, Palestinian politicians, academics and observers.

The report argues that al-Qaida leaders have sought political influence among the Palestinians through an offensive propaganda campaign interfering in internal Palestinian matters, criticising Hamas for its moves towards political moderation. It is argued that the verbal campaign has been accompanied by moves to establish an operational foothold for al-Qaida in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, the analysis maintains that al-Qaida's verbal attacks and the emergence of armed salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza represent a real political challenge for Hamas, which has generally responded to the salafi-jihadi criticism in a defensive language, reflecting fears within Hamas of the receptiveness among the radical elements of the movement to the message of Osama bin Laden's Palestinian followers.

Sammendrag

Denne rapporten drøfter hvordan fenomenet al-Qaida har påvirket den palestinske politiske arena, med hovedvekt på situasjonen i den Hamas-styrte Gazastripen hvor en rekke mindre salafi-jihadistgrupperinger har blitt etablert de siste årene. Tre aspekter ved forholdet mellom det palestinske politiske miljøet og det globale al-Qaida-nettverket blir diskutert: For det første tar rapporten for seg hvordan al-Qaida-ledere har forsøkt å vinne innflytelse i den palestinske opinion ved bruk av propagandautspill i media. For det andre undersøker rapporten foreliggende indikasjoner på operasjonell aktivitet blant al-Qaida-inspirerte grupper i de palestinske områdene. For det tredje analyserer rapporten hvordan Hamas har respondert på utfordringen fra al-Qaida og i hvilken grad sistnevntes ideologi har hatt en innflytelse på Hamas' politikk.

Analysen er basert på nyhetsmedia, akademisk litteratur, transkripsjoner av erklæringer fra al-Qaida-ledere og deres palestinske støttespillere publisert på internett, samt på feltarbeidsintervjuer med Hamasledere, palestinske politikere, akademikere og observatører.

Rapporten argumenterer for at al-Qaida-ledere har søkt politisk innflytelse blant palestinerne gjennom en offensiv propagandakampanje rettet mot interne palestinske forhold, blant annet ved å kritisere Hamas for sine skritt i retning av politisk moderasjon. Det hevdes at parallelt med denne verbale kampanjen, er det gjort fremstøt for å etablere et operasjonelt fotfeste for al-Qaida i den israelsk-palestinske konflikten. Endelig fremholdes det at al-Qaidas verbale angrep og fremveksten av væpnede salafi-jihadistgrupper i Gaza representerer en reell politisk utfordring for Hamas, som oftest har besvart salafi-jihadistenes kritikk med defensiv språkbruk, noe som gjenspeiler frykt innen Hamas for at radikale elementer innen bevegelsen er mottakelige for budskapet til Osama bin Ladens palestinske støttespillere.

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1 Introduction

An increasing number of reports from media, research institutions, think tanks and intelligence apparatuses have raised the question of whether or not the Palestinian territories have been penetrated by al-Qaida operatives during the past few years. Government sources within the Palestinian Authority (PA), Israel, and the neighbouring Arab countries claim that their respective intelligence services have detected salafi-jihadi activities that were previously unknown in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

This report focuses on three related aspects of the relationship between the Palestinian polity and the global salafi-jihadi network that is inspired by al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden. First, it explores attempts by al-Qaida to influence the Palestinian political environment by means of propaganda. Al-Qaida leaders have, during the past few years, increasingly expressed opinions on Palestinian internal affairs, actively taking advantage of the interest in the subject of al-Qaida in Arab and international media. Following the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas's entry into parliamentary politics in January 2006, Hamas has become a target of frequent verbal attacks by close associates of Osama bin Laden, most notably by his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, criticising Hamas for its political changes, most notably for forfeiting the jihad for the sake of politics. Secondly, the report investigates – concentrating on the developments in the Gaza Strip – to what extent this campaign of verbal attacks has been accompanied by operational activities and the formation of al-Qaida affiliated, clandestine groups within the Palestinian political landscape. Finally, the report discusses how Hamas has responded to the pressure of al-Qaida and to what extent the salafi-jihadi ideology has had any impact on the policy choices of Hamas itself.

In addition to secondary literature and news reports, this report is based on fieldwork interviews with Hamas officials and other Palestinian politicians, Palestinian and foreign academics, and diplomats. The fieldwork was conducted during three visits, each lasting two weeks: one visit to Gaza and the West Bank, and Syria in March 2007; a second to the same places and to Lebanon in August/September 2007, and a third visit to Gaza and the West Bank in March/April 2008. These field visits were conducted partly for other research work and the issue of salafi-jihadi activities was brought up as a secondary issue during this research. The linking of the fieldwork to other research was organised in this way due to the sensitivity of the subject, as there was reason to believe that an isolated focus on the issues of al-Qaida and salafi-jihadi activities would provoke negative reactions from some of the respondents, possibly resulting in limiting access to the relevant political leaders.

The terms “Islamist”, “jihadi/jihadist” and “salafi/salafist” are often applied with lack of precision in both the media and academic literature. Sometimes these labels are used as synonyms, although such usage obviously obscures rather than clarifies important nuances within the ideological, political and religious landscape of Islamic and Arabic societies. These nuances are most relevant for the analysis in this report which focuses on the relationship between the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, on the one hand, and the supporters of the international al-Qaida

network on the other. “Islamism” here refers to what Olivier Roy has formulated as “the brand of modern political Islamic fundamentalism that claims to re-create a true Islamic society, not simply by imposing *sharia*, but by establishing first an Islamic state through political action.”¹ The Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is part, belongs to this reformist tradition as it aims to Islamise society through democratic and political participation. While “jihadi” and “salafi” are both expressions commonly used to describe al-Qaida’s ideology, characterised by the use of indiscriminate violence to fight against the enemies of Islam and to re-establish the pan-Islamic Caliphate, they refer to different aspects of the ideology. “Jihad” means holy war and has both a religious and a militant meaning. “Salafi” furthermore, is an even wider term as it refers to the utopian goal of re-establishing Islamic society as it was during the time of the first Khalifs – the pious ancestors – of the Islamic tradition.² However, not all salafis are violent; some explicitly condemn the use of violence, and some even focus only on personal religious duties and consequently retire even from political activities. In this report, the term “salafi-jihadism” is used to describe al-Qaida’s ideology of using violence and terror to reach its religious-political goals. This is also the self-description that has become widely used by the supporters of al-Qaida to describe their affiliation.

2 International terrorism and the Palestinian context

Al-Qaida’s ongoing campaign of global terrorism is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the kind of violent activities perpetrated by the various Palestinian nationalist organisations in the past. Al-Qaida has a global strategy, underpinned by religious dogmas; it is organised as an international network, aiming to combat the US military, political and economic interests in the Muslim world and, ultimately, to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate. By contrast, the armed operations of the Palestinian organisations have always been related to the specific issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the promotion of specific nationalist goals such as the liberation of the Palestinian homeland from Israeli occupation, national self-determination, and the right of return of the Palestinian refugees living in exile across Middle Eastern countries.

However, international terrorism – defined as violent acts targeting civilians outside the conflict area with the political aim of obtaining international publicity – is far from new to the Palestinian scene. It was the Marxist-oriented Palestine Front for the Liberation of Palestine’s (PFLP) infamous airplane hijackings that brought international attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the late 1960s, while the Fatah-linked Black September organization committed terrorist attacks on Israeli targets in Europe in the early 1970s.³ Some years later, the Fatah renegade Sabri el-Banna, better known as Abu Nidal, staged numerous bloody attacks on European airports,

¹ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam. The Search for a New Ummah*, London: Hurst, 2004.

² See Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism”, draft chapter to appear in Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, London and New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2009 forthcoming.

³ Harold M. Cubert, *The PFLP's Changing Role in the Middle East*, London: Frank Cass, 1997, pp.131-137; and Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.308-311.

Israeli diplomats, and Palestinian officials.⁴ In spite of their conflict-specific focus on Palestine, several of the Palestinian organisations had an international component through *ad hoc* cooperation with separatist movements and terrorist groups outside the Middle East, including the Irish Republican Army, the Basque ETA, the Italian Red Brigades, the West German Baader Meinhof group/Red Army Faction, and the Japanese Red Army.⁵ The PFLP, Black September and the Abu Nidal Group were the key actors in these networking efforts.⁶ However, the relationship between these organisations was not based on a vision of a global struggle against a common enemy – which is the case with today’s al-Qaida network – but rather on a common interest in practical cooperation on training and logistic support.

In the past, the creation and growth of radical or extremist offshoots of established Palestinian nationalist organisations was usually triggered by political changes in the leadership’s strategies toward diplomacy, moderation and political compromise on key national goals. All the major political moves taken by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leadership towards accommodation with Israel has been followed by internal upheaval, organisational splits, or violent protests. When the PLO in 1974, for the first time, launched a political program that prepared the ground for a territorial compromise with Israel based on the principle of a two-state solution, the Fatah-spokesman Sabri al-Banna split from the movement and formed the Fatah Revolutionary Council, the formal name of the Abu Nidal Group. For the next two decades, the Abu Nidal Group staged lethal attacks in more than 20 countries.⁷

The militant Islamist movement Hamas also emerged and grew strong, at least partly as a reaction to the diplomatic moves conducted by the PLO in the late 1980s and early 1990s in preparation for peace negotiations with Israel. Hamas secured its position as the main defender of Palestinian national rights and continued military resistance against Israeli occupation and the PLO’s involvement in peace diplomacy – first by the PLO’s recognition of Israel in 1988 and then by its subsequent involvement in negotiations with Israel from 1991.⁸ The failure of the PLO’s diplomacy in the breakdown of final status talks in Camp David in 2000 and the subsequent outbreak of the second Intifada further boosted the popularity of Hamas as the main alternative to the discredited Fatah movement of the PLO, paving the way for Hamas’s electoral victory in January 2006.

The question today is whether Hamas’s participation in parliamentary politics and the burden of governmental responsibilities, which has forced the movement to adjust elements of its maximalist program, represent an opening for a new generation of radicals, represented by al-Qaida and its affiliates, to fill the vacuum that may have been created by Hamas’s newly adopted

⁴ Patrick Seale, *Abu Nidal. A Gun for Hire*, London, Random House, 1992.

⁵ Cindy C. Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003, pp. 96-113.

⁶ Paul Wilkinson, “Terrorism: International Dimensions”, in William Gutteridge (ed.), *The New Terrorism*, London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1986, pp. 38–39.

⁷ United States Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2004*, Washington DC, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/45394.htm> (accessed June 2008).

⁸ Hisham H. Ahmad, *Hamas. From Religious Salvation to Political Transformation: The Rise of Hamas in Palestinian Society*, Jerusalem: PASSIA, 1994, pp. 64, 103-115.

pragmatism. Al-Qaida's rhetoric, constantly attacking Hamas for its political opportunism, indicates that the salafi-jihadis are indeed aspiring to inherit the role of the uncompromising defender of Palestine – although within the framework of a broader Islamic agenda.

Its radical image notwithstanding, Hamas has never belonged to those groups that have brought the struggle for the national liberation of Palestine to the international scene in the form of international terrorism. Contrary to Fatah and PFLP, which used international terrorism as a means of obtaining publicity and awareness of their cause, Hamas has always limited its military operations to Israeli targets within the borders of the contested land of Palestine/Israel. Even in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, which have been a hotbed for armed Palestinian groups since the early 1970s, Hamas has established itself as the only major political faction without an armed presence in the country.⁹ However, Hamas's self-imposed restraint has come under pressure on several occasions as militant leaders within the movement have argued for expanding the area of operation to include Israeli targets abroad as well as US targets. For instance, following presumed Israeli under-cover operations against Hamas operatives in Syria in 2004, Hamas deputy Musa Abu Marzuq warned that “now that Israel has expanded its war against Hamas to include neighbouring countries, there are many voices calling for attacking Israeli targets abroad.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the option of attacking American interests has been discussed in Hamas in the context of US political and economic support to Israel, the US crack-down on Islamist organisations following the War on Terror since 2001, and the war in Iraq.¹¹ But so far, rhetorical attacks and vague threats about attacking American targets, or Israeli targets abroad, have never been translated into action.¹²

This point is relevant because if we, for the sake of comparison, categorise the Palestinian guerrilla organisations – and al-Qaida – along a national-global axis in terms of their area of armed operation, we will find that Hamas represents the most ‘pure’ nationalist trend among the Palestinians, as it confines its military operations strictly to the land of Palestine. At the other end of the scale, the only Palestinian group that would get close to al-Qaida in its internationally oriented terrorism would be the Abu Nidal Group. Fatah, PFLP and most of the other factions of the PLO would be firmly based in the nationalist side of the scale, although their path has not been as ‘clean’ as that of Hamas in terms of limiting the area of combat.

Another ideological axis, which is increasingly relevant in the Palestinian case, is that of religious-secular orientation. Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who are both affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, represent the religious pole of the axis, while at the opposite pole we

⁹ Author's interviews with Hamas leaders in the Palestinian refugee camps of Ein el-Hilweh, Bourj el-Barajneh, and Baddawi, Lebanon, August-September 2007.

¹⁰ Khaled Abu Toameh, “Hamas to Beduin parents: Don't let sons serve in IDF”, *Jerusalem Post*, 17 December 2004.

¹¹ Matthew Levitt, “Could Hamas Target the West?” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol.30, No.11 (2007), pp. 925-7. In a joint manifesto released by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives on 17 December 2001, Americans were labelled “a target for future attacks”. See also “Hamas and Islamic Jihad: We Will Continue Suicide Bombings”, *Haaretz*, 17 December 2001.

¹² Levitt, “Could Hamas Target the West”, p.931.

would find the secularly oriented leftist groups of the PFLP and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and also some pan-Arab parties, such as al-Saiqa. It is important to note that the dominant force in the Palestinian national movement, al-Fatah, is to be found somewhere in the middle, rather than at the secular pole as sometimes wrongly portrayed in popular literature. Many of the founding fathers of the Fatah movement were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In later years, Fatah has increasingly emphasised its adherence to Islamic values – possibly as a strategy to counter the growing challenge from the Hamas movement.

These two categorisations may be useful to keep in mind because, to the extent that the Palestinian environment is receptive to al-Qaida rhetoric, ideology, and methods, it is not necessarily only Hamas members and traditional Islamists that would be affected by that challenge.

3 Al-Qaida's traditional interest in Palestine: more rhetoric than action

Al-Qaida's interest in the Palestinian issue is not new, although some popular accounts seem to link bin Laden's focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the post-9/11 era. Even though bin Laden's main focus throughout the years has been on the role of the USA in the Islamic world – or “the head of the snake” in bin Laden's terminology – the issue of Palestine has always figured highly on his topical agenda. Thomas Hegghammer has investigated al-Qaida texts between 1990 and 2004 and concludes that, contrary to what many analysts and policy-makers seem to believe, “Palestine is all over al-Qaida's propaganda and has been so for over a decade.”¹³ Bin Laden has referred to the suffering of the Palestinians from his earliest letters and statements and has continued doing so until today. The Palestine problem was a main topic in the first of his public pronouncements intended for a wider audience in the form of a letter addressed to the Chief Mufti in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, bin Baz, in December 1994. The title of the letter was “The Betrayal of Palestine,” and it criticizes bin Baz's endorsement of the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO. Bin Laden's support for Palestinian maximalist demands is uncompromising in the letter: “The legal duty regarding Palestine and our brothers there – these poor men, women, and children who have nowhere to go – is to wage *jihad* for the sake of God, and to motivate our *umma* to *jihad* so that Palestine may be completely liberated and returned to Islamic sovereignty.”¹⁴

¹³ Thomas Hegghammer, “Osama bin Laden's true priorities”, *The Guardian*, 3 December 2007. http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/thomas_hegghammer/2007/12/osama_bin_ladens_true_priorities.html; Thomas Hegghammer: *Dokumentasjon om al-Qa'ida - Intervjuer, kommunik er og andre prim erkilder, 1990-2002*. FFI/Rapport No. 2002/01393. Kjeller: FFI, 2002. <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2002/01393.pdf>; and Thomas Hegghammer, *Al-Qaida statements 2003-2004 - A compilation of translated texts by Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri*, FFI/Rapport No. 2005/01428, Kjeller: FFI, 2005. <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2005/01428.pdf>.

¹⁴ Bruce Lawrence, *Messages to the World. The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 9.

One reason for this misunderstanding may be the fact that during the 1990s there was little reverberation among the Palestinians for bin Laden's declaratory militancy on their behalf. Those Palestinians who opposed Yasser Arafat's far-reaching concessions to Israel at the negotiating table and who remained devoted to the doctrine of jihad to liberate Palestine would naturally lean towards genuinely Palestinian organisations such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad. As long as these Islamist organisations remained committed to the goal of liberating Palestine "from the river to the sea," rejecting peace negotiations and refusing to recognise the "Zionist entity", the impact of bin Laden's statements was minimal within the Palestinian arena.

Furthermore, al-Qaida's relative lack of interest in Israeli targets in operational terms during its early period may have left the misleading impression of a correspondingly weak ideological affiliation to the Palestinian issue. But there is no doubt that the suffering of the Arabs of Palestine always was a strong mobilising factor for salafi-jihadis as a persistent example of Muslims who suffer at the hands of non-Muslims. The new function of Hamas as a parliamentary responsible actor opened the door for a potential role for al-Qaida in Palestine. When Hamas decided to participate in the January 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council it speeded up a process already well in motion of moderating its once inflexible position towards more pragmatism within several fields. The election program of the Hamas list of "Change and Reform" presented a 'moderate' face of Palestinian Islamism with regard to two main areas: first, it did not emphasise the issue of Islamisation of society and adoption of sharia, Islamic Law, in legislation, which were integral elements of Hamas's original program as expressed in its Charter from 1988.¹⁵ Instead, the election program focused on institutional reforms, ending corruption, and improving governance within the PA infrastructure. Secondly, the election program focused on "struggle against occupation" widely understood as aiming at sovereignty within the territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, rather than focusing on the original maximalist formulation of "liberating Palestine" as it appears in previous Hamas documents.¹⁶

Al-Qaida did not hesitate challenging the Hamas leadership at each of the subsequent stages that followed in the wake of Hamas's decision to participate in elections, including: the formation of government; the internal conflict between Hamas and Fatah that followed after Hamas's electoral victory in 2006; the formulation of the Palestinian National Unity government that was established following the Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas in February 2007; and, finally, the armed takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas militia in June 2007.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy of Osama bin Laden, staged a virtual campaign against the policy choices of the Hamas leadership with frequent comments, advice, criticism, and – a few times – conditional support. The statements have almost always been published in the form of video tapes

¹⁵ For an English translation of the Hamas Charter, see Appendix 2 in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2002, pp.267-291.

¹⁶ See Khaled Hroub, 'A "New Hamas" through its New Documents', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol.35, No.4 (2006), pp.6-27.

or audio tapes posted on salafi-jihadi forums on the Internet or broadcast by the Qatar based al-Jazeera television.¹⁷

Participation in elections has been a key issue of criticism of salafi-jihadis against the moderate Islamists affiliated with the trans-national movement of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is a part. Al-Zawahiri, who frequently has attacked the Hamas leaders for their trust in the parliamentary system, has repeatedly in the past criticised the Brotherhood for pursuing the strategy of parliamentary legitimacy for decades without any success.¹⁸ When the political stalemate between the Fatah and Hamas factions led President Abbas to threaten to hold early elections, al-Zawahiri argued that the vote will not liberate “a grain of Palestinian sand, but will choke Jihad.”¹⁹

Another frequent theme in al-Qaida’s criticism against Hamas is the allegation that the latter has “abandoned jihad.” For instance, the leading al-Qaida figure Sheikh Abu Yahia al-Libi stated in September 2007 that “We caution some of the Islamic groups, among them Hamas, which are risking the blood of their sons...to cleanse and purify their jihad of contemporary jihadi pollutants.”²⁰ Hamas’s military restraint as illustrated by declaring – and holding – several unilateral ceasefires with Israel since 2003 made the movement potentially vulnerable to criticism for having abandoned the strategy of jihad.

Hamas’s apparent pragmatism in international relations represents yet another example of the moral degeneration on the part of the Hamas movement, according to al-Qaida ideologues. This was demonstrated, for instance, when the Russian President Vladimir Putin, apparently in an attempt to bolster Russian influence in the Middle East, invited Hamas leaders to visit Moscow in March 2006. In light of the international boycott of the movement following its recent election victory, this was a highly welcome diplomatic victory for Hamas. However, relations with Moscow could only be nurtured at the expense of solidarity with the Chechen Islamic groups engaged in a bloody struggle for independence from Russia. Al-Qaida leaders condemned this act of realpolitik on the part of Hamas. One of them, Yahya al-Libi, accused Hamas of “betraying the Chechen cause” by meeting with the “murderous corrupt Russian leaders whose crimes are worse than those of Sharon.”²¹

¹⁷ Many of these statements have been translated into English by MEMRI, see <http://memri.org>.

¹⁸ The continuous feud between the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaida on this issue can be followed on the Internet site of the Muslim Brotherhood. See “Al-Qaeda vs. Muslim Brotherhood – an online feud”, *Ikhwanweb.com*, January 11, 2006, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=4991&SectionID=147> (accessed June 2008).

¹⁹ “Zawahiri: Palestinian Elections Futile, Only Jihad Will End Occupation”, *VOA News*, 20 December 2006, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/news/2006/12/sec-061220-voa01.htm> (accessed June 2008).

²⁰ Cited in Khalid Amayreh: “Hamas and al-Qaida. The Prospects for Radicalization in the Palestinian Occupied Territories.” Beirut, London and Washington: Conflicts Forum, Conflicts Forum Monograph, October, 2007.

²¹ “Al-Qaeda: Hamas betrayed God”, *Ynet News* 6 May 2007, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3396525,00.html>; <http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2372404> (accessed June 2008).

Hamas's refusal to comply with the three conditions that the Quartet (the USA, the EU, UN and Russia) set for opening diplomatic relations with the newly elected Hamas government in 2006 – recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence, and acceptance of past Israeli-Palestinian agreements – led to international diplomatic and economic sanctions being imposed upon the government. Partly as a response to this international isolation, Hamas undertook two substantial policy changes in an attempt to accommodate the Western powers' demands. First, in an agreement with other Palestinian factions in June 2006, called the National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners, Hamas went as far as granting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) president the mandate to conduct peace negotiations with Israel, within the framework of a two-state solution.²² Secondly, the following year, Hamas agreed to “respect” previous agreements signed by the PLO as formulated in the Mecca Agreement which led to the formation of a National Unity Government between Hamas and Fatah.²³

The compromises that Hamas accepted by signing the Prisoners' Document and the Mecca Agreement represented two huge steps along the path of pragmatism and were reached only with considerable internal friction within Hamas. According to Ali Jarbawi, an expert on Hamas at Bir Zeit University, key figures within Hamas, including Said Siam and Mahmoud Zahar “were against the Mecca Agreement, but they did not go public.”²⁴ As expected, the flexibility of Hamas in Mecca provoked another round of verbal attacks from al-Qaida. Al-Zawahiri blamed Hamas for having “fallen in the swamp of surrender.”²⁵ In response to inquiries regarding his harsh criticism of Hamas, al-Zawahiri explained:

I stepped up my criticism gradually (...) but when they signed the Mecca Agreement there was no escape from open criticism (...) They did not heed their brothers' opinion and [instead] persisted without forethought in their path of entering the elections, adhering to a secular constitution, abandoning their Chechen brothers [by meeting with President Putin], and forfeiting four-fifths of Palestine in [the] Mecca [Agreement]... I criticized them and will continue to do so as long as they adhere to a secular constitution and (...) do not renounce the Mecca Agreement.²⁶

According to Islamist scholar Mohsen Saleh, Director of the Zeituna Institute in Beirut, receiving such accusations is extremely distressing for Hamas leaders because it challenges the unique status that Hamas used to enjoy across the Islamic world as the righteous defender of an

²² For an English translation of the National Conciliation Document, see: <http://www.jmcc.org/documents/prisoners2.htm> (accessed June 2008).

²³ For an English translation of the Mecca Agreement, see: <http://www.jmcc.org/new/07/feb/meccaagree.htm> (accessed June 2008).

²⁴ Author's interview with Professor Ali Jarbawi, Bir Zeit, 13 March, 2007.

²⁵ “Al-Qaida's no. 2 slams Hamas for agreeing to unity government”, *Haaretz*, 11 March 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/835807.html> (accessed June 2008).

²⁶ “Open Meeting with Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri” MEMRI: Special Dispatch Series, No. 1887, 4 April 2008, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP188708> (accessed June 2008).

oppressed Islamic people suffering from Zionist, colonial aggression, supported by the western, non-Islamic world.

Hamas leaders were used to the position of being well respected by all types of Islamic movements all over the world. If you go to Turkey or Indonesia you will find Islamists looking to Hamas as an example to be followed. Even the people from the bin Laden school of thought that disagreed with much of Hamas's policies, were not openly critical because nobody were in a position to criticise Hamas who had sacrificed so much in their struggle. However, what we have seen after Hamas won the elections and formed the government is that al-Qaida has turned much more critical towards Hamas. This is very alarming as it comes together with al-Qaida's attempts to find supporters and establish bases in Jordan and Palestine.²⁷

Saleh believed, furthermore, that the cautious tone in the various responses on the part of Hamas to al-Qaida's accusations disclosed a tendency of shunning a verbal showdown with the global salafi-jihadis in a situation where it was preoccupied with adapting to its new political role in the domestic arena.

Salafi-jihadi activists were actively discussing how to recruit Hamas members to join their ranks, initially by inviting them to participate in the online jihadist community in the al-Hesbah Network. In May 2006, a member of the forum urged Hamas to join the network, saying their statements would be a benefit to the jihadist community. He furthermore advises Hamas not to let fears of American accusations of terrorism keep it from participating in the forum, because "no doubt it will follow you even if you take off your skin."²⁸ These are viewpoints to which many Hamas members obviously would subscribe.

4 Palestinian public opinion

Al-Qaida's active participation in public media shows that it has an ambition to be perceived as more than a group of violent jihadis. While its leaders proudly defend the method of jihad and martyrdom as their main tool for liberating the Muslim Umma from aggression and humiliation at the hands of the 'crusaders' and the 'Jews', its frequent media appearances also reflect its concern for the political message. The aim is to affect the broader public opinion in Arab and Muslim countries. In the case of the Palestinians, the public relations campaign of al-Qaida seems to have paid off well: judging by opinion polls, the Palestinian population appears to offer a fertile ground for anti-Western and pro-al-Qaida sentiments.

A study conducted by the Jordanian Centre for Strategic Studies in 2004 found that the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories display a higher degree of support for al-Qaida than do the citizens any of the neighbouring countries. While 70 percent of the Palestinians labelled al-Qaida as a 'resistance movement', only seven percent viewed it as a 'terrorist organisation'. By

²⁷ Author's interview with Mohsen Saleh, Beirut, 3 September 2007.

²⁸ "Jihadist Forum Members Question When Hamas Will Join the al-Qaeda Affiliated Networks", *SITE Intelligence Group*, 26 May 2006.

comparison, 67 percent of Jordanians, 41 percent of Egyptians, and 18 percent of Lebanese viewed al-Qaida as a resistance movement.²⁹ Another poll conducted by Fafo in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from November-December 2005 found that 65 percent of Palestinians in total expressed their support for al-Qaida bombing operations in the USA or Europe (by contrast to 32 percent support for al-Qaida operations in Iraq). Notably, the poll revealed significantly higher support for al-Qaida attacks against Western countries among Palestinians in Gaza (79 percent) than in the West Bank (57 percent). Hamas sympathisers were, furthermore, clearly more supportive (79 percent) than Fatah sympathisers (62 percent) for al-Qaida's operations in Western countries.³⁰ It is difficult to judge to what extent such polls reflect the level of genuine support for al-Qaida or rather are indicating a general level of frustration with what is perceived as biased Western support for Israel and neglect of Palestinian rights. Still, with such high portions of the population viewing al-Qaida as a resistance movement whose attacks in Europe and the USA are justified, two central questions arise: first, to what extent have these strongly anti-Western sentiments found their expression through organised activities, and the establishment of al-Qaida affiliated groups? Secondly, how does the mainstream Islamist force among the Palestinians, the Hamas movement, face this apparent political challenge from salafi-jihadi forces?

5 The Palestinian component of al-Qaida

The core of the al-Qaida leadership and activists were those Arab volunteers fighting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Among the early followers of Osama bin Laden were many young men from Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt. While the Palestinians were mostly preoccupied with their own struggle of national liberation, some Palestinian volunteers found their way to Afghanistan to join the struggle under the Islamic banner.

The Palestinian figure who has most firmly set his fingerprints on the ideology and organisation of al-Qaida is the late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, who is often referred to as bin Laden's spiritual leader. Azzam was born in Jenin in the West Bank, became a member of the Muslim Brotherhood at a young age, and was educated at al-Azhar University in Cairo where he befriended the eminent ideologue of Islamic militancy, Sayyed Qutb and obtained his Ph.D. in *fiqh* – Islamic Jurisprudence. Azzam established the *Maktab al-Khadamat* – the Mujahedin Service Bureau – with guesthouses in Peshawar, Pakistan, and offices in many parts of the world, including the US. The Service Bureau became a key institution in recruiting Arabs for *jihad* in Afghanistan.³¹ According to Lawrence Wright, Azzam played a role in the creation of Hamas, which he saw as a natural extension of the jihad in Afghanistan. Azzam wanted to organise training of Hamas activists in Afghanistan in order to let them return to fight Israel, but this idea was not supported

²⁹ *Revisiting the Arab Street. Research from within* Amman: Center for Strategic Studies (CSS), University of Jordan, February 2005.

³⁰ Gro Hasselknippe, *Palestinian Opinions on Peace and Conflict, Internal Affairs and Parliament Elections 2006: Results from Fafo polls in September and November-December 2005*, Oslo: Fafo, 2006, Fafo-paper No.2006:09.

³¹ Thomas Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam, the Imam of Jihad" in Gilles Kepel et al, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 81–101.

by Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri.³² Azzam died in Peshawar in 1989, assassinated by unknown perpetrators.³³

Another leading Palestinian clerical al-Qaida leader is Omar Uthman Abu Omar – better known as Abu Qatada al-Filastini – born in Bethlehem (although a Jordanian citizen). He is often referred to as al-Qaida’s spiritual leader in Europe, known for justifying the extreme violence of the Armed Islamic Group, GIA, in Algeria, before he was arrested and jailed in the U.K. in 2001.³⁴ With a similarly hard-line reputation – even within al-Qaida circles – was Abu Anas al-Shami, a religious scholar from a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, who provided legal fatwas condoning al-Qaida’s practice of kidnapping and killing hostages in the Iraq War. Also among the members of the al-Qaida ‘hardcore’ was Zein al-Abideen Mohammed Hassan, alias Abu Zubaydah, a Saudi-born Palestinian who functioned as a key recruiter of volunteers to training camps in Peshawar in the late 1980s. He was involved in a thwarted ‘Millennium plot’ in Jordan in 1999 and was captured in Pakistan in 2002.³⁵ Finally, Issam Mohammad Tahir al-Barqawi, better known as Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, was a Palestinian said to be a mentor and a spiritual leader of the al-Qaida leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Maqdisi wrote a letter in August 2004 from his prison cell in Jordan urging al-Zarqawi to expand al-Qaida’s activities to “the west of the river,” meaning the Palestinian territories.³⁶ Al-Maqdisi may thus have been an important promoter for the transformation of al-Qaida’s uncompromising rhetoric on the Palestinian issue into operational activities within the borders of Palestine/Israel. Although these Palestinian figures previously had limited influence within the Palestinian political arena, their example may still be a source inspiration for the alternative of global jihad among politically disgruntled Palestinian youth today.

In spite of the above mentioned cases of Palestinian figures reaching prominent positions within the al-Qaida leadership, there are few traces of solid, organisational linkages between al-Qaida and Palestinian organisations. However, several Palestinian groups did have contact with al-Qaida leaders on a number of occasions during the 1990s. Prominent leaders of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (as well as the PLO) participated alongside delegations from all the groups represented in bin Laden’s Islamic Army Shura at the first meeting of the Popular Arab and Islamic Conference in Khartoum in 1991, a creation of Sudan’s Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi.³⁷ Khartoum developed into a safe haven and a natural meeting place for salafi-jihadist,

³² Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Bozoi Books, 2006, p 149.

³³ Hegghammer, “Abdallah Azzam, the Imam of Jihad”, pp. 81–101.

³⁴ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad. The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri*, London and New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2007, p.3; and Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret Story of al-Qa’ida*, London: Abacus, 2006, p.231.

³⁵ Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda. Casting a Shadow of Terror*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003, pp. 97, 185-6.

³⁶ Zaki Chehab, *Inside Hamas. The Untold Story of Militants, Martyrs and Spies*, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007, p. 194.

³⁷ The 9/11 Commission Report, New York: W. W. Norton & Company (2004), pp. 60–61; and Atwan, *The Secret Story of al-Qaida*, p. 40.

Islamist and non-Islamist violent groups in the Middle East.³⁸ Bin Laden used the opportunity to seek relations with radical Islamist organisations, aiming to establish a ‘confederation of terrorists from almost every corner of the Muslim world’.³⁹ Ayman al-Zawahiri approached several Palestinian Islamist leaders in order to coordinate activities and in 1994-95, he held meetings with Musa Abu Marzuq of Hamas and Fathi al-Shiqaqi of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, in addition to representatives of organisations such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Tunisian al-Nahdha. These meetings were held in Tehran and Cyprus as well as Khartoum⁴⁰. Al-Zawahiri’s efforts reflected an apparent interest on the part of al-Qaida in improving its international network. Al-Qaida’s focus at that stage was not on the Palestine issue and al-Zawahiri failed to obtain any commitments from the Palestinian leaders.

6 Closing in on Israel

The first known incident of a possible attempt to set up an al-Qaida cell in the Palestinian territories was in 1998 when Nabil Ukal, a Palestinian from Jabailya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, returned to Gaza after having undergone training in an al-Qaida camp in Afghanistan. According to his testimony in Israeli detention in June 2000 he had tried to recruit Palestinians in Gaza as well as in the Arab town of Umm al-Fahm in Israel to a planned cell linked to al-Qaida. Ukal was also charged with membership in Hamas, a fact that nurtured speculations about Hamas’s relationship with al-Qaida.⁴¹

Another attempted operation by al-Qaida in Israel was in early 2001 when the British citizen Richard Reid toured Israel looking for potential targets. Later that year Reid became known as the ‘shoe bomber’ after he carried a bomb hidden in his shoe onto an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami.⁴²

However, the main boost for al-Qaida’s interest in Israeli targets came with the terror attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent American War on Terror. The following two years, a series of terror attacks were directed against a number of Israeli and Jewish targets at different locations in Africa. These included a deadly attack on a synagogue in Tunisia in April 2002,⁴³ and a twin attack targeting Israeli tourists in Kenya – including a suicide bombing against an Israeli-owned hotel and a failed missile attack on an Israeli jetliner – in November the same

³⁸ Wright, *The Looming Tower*, p. 196.

³⁹ The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 60.

⁴⁰ Nimrod Raphaeli, “Radical Islamist Profiles (3): Ayman Muhammad Rabi' Al-Zawahiri: The Making of an Arch Terrorist.” MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series, No. 127, 11 March 2003. <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA12703> (accessed June 2008).

⁴¹ “Bin Laden Ring Planned Mass Terror Campaign”, *Jerusalem Post*, 22 August 2000; Yoram Schweitzer and Shaul Shai, *The Globalization of Terror. The Challenge of al-Qaeda and the Response of the International Community*, Piscataway: Transaction Publications, 2008, pp. 37-38; and Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside al-Qaeda. Global Network of Terror*, New York: Colombia University Press, 2002, pp. 150-151.

⁴² Hegghammer, “Osama bin Laden’s true priorities”.

⁴³ “Al-Qaeda claims Tunisia attack”, *BBC News*, 23 June 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2061071.stm (accessed September 2008).

year.⁴⁴ In May 2003, a Jewish community centre and a Jewish cemetery were among the targets of a coordinated five-bomb attack in Casablanca, Morocco,⁴⁵ and in November that year two synagogues in Istanbul, Turkey, were bombed by explosive-packed trucks.⁴⁶ In addition, a planned al-Qaida attack on the Israeli national football team during an away game in Malta in October 2002 was disclosed and averted after a tip from Israeli security services.⁴⁷

Some observers interpreted this new trend of staging attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets as an attempt to rally Arab opinion behind al-Qaida in confronting the US-led War on Terror.⁴⁸ At a time when world opinion witnessed what United Nations agencies termed as Israeli use of “excessive force” against Palestinian unarmed and armed activists of the ongoing intifada,⁴⁹ the attacks could be seen as a response to what Al-Quds al-Arabi editor Abdul Bari Atwan described as the “anger” in the Arab world that Israel had not been touched by al-Qaida previously.⁵⁰

This interpretation is supported by the content of an audio tape of a speech of Osama bin Laden that was published two weeks before the attacks in Kenya. In his speech, bin Laden claims to be defending “our people in Palestine” and threatens Israel with revenge: “Our kinfolk in Palestine have been slain and severely tortured for nearly a century (...) You will be killed just as you kill, and will be bombed just as you bomb,” bin Laden declared on the tape.⁵¹ If these indications of a greater desire to harm Israel reflected a fundamental shift in al-Qaida’s choice of targets, it would be reasonable to assume that al-Qaida would also seek to establish a foothold among the Palestinians.

From an Israeli perspective, al-Qaida’s declarations of “support” for the Palestine cause corresponded well with Israeli efforts to align its own war against Palestinian militants with the wider war against bin Laden and al-Qaida.⁵² In December 2002, one week after the terrorist attacks on Israelis in Kenya, Israel’s Prime Minister Ariel Sharon claimed that al-Qaida militants were operating in the Gaza Strip. “For some time we have received reports of al-Qaida members

⁴⁴ “Kenya terror strikes target Israelis”, *BBC News*, 28 November 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2522207.stm> (accessed September 2008).

⁴⁵ “Bomb carnage shocks Morocco”, *BBC News*, 17 May, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3037157.stm> (accessed September 2008).

⁴⁶ “Turkey blasts ‘threat to peace’”, *BBC News*, 15 November 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3272815.stm>, (accessed September 2008).

⁴⁷ “Al-Qaeda ‘targeted Israeli footballers’”, *BBC News*, 4 December, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2542341.stm (accessed September 2008).

⁴⁸ Paul Reynolds, “Analysis: Al-Qaeda takes on Israel?” *BBC News*, 29 November 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2527133.stm, (accessed September 2008).

⁴⁹ “Annan Condemns Israel for Using Excessive Force”, *U.N. Wire*, 14 May 2001, http://www.unwire.org/unwire/20010514/14746_story.asp, (accessed September 2008).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “‘You will be killed, just as you kill’”, *The Guardian*, 14 November 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/alqaida/story/0,,839599,00.html> (accessed September 2008).

⁵² Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, London: C Hurst & Co, 2007, p. 150.

entering [Palestinian areas inside] Israel. (...) The reports at the moment are of the presence of a few in the Gaza Strip,” Sharon told media.⁵³

In the context of an Israeli interest in capitalising on the War on Terror by grouping Palestinian militants in the same category as al-Qaida, such allegations were met with suspicion among the Palestinians. Yasser Arafat dismissed Sharon’s statement as a “big, big, big lie, to cover Sharon’s attacks and his crimes against our people.”⁵⁴

The PA went on the offensive against the charges, and claimed that Palestinian intelligence had disclosed and arrested ‘fake al-Qaida operatives’ set up by Mossad. The head of the Palestinian Preventive Security, Colonel Rashid Abu-Shbak, said that eight Palestinians had been approached from outside Gaza, and had been asked by Israeli agents to work for money and weapons. “We are sure that Israel is behind this and that there are absolutely no groups such as al-Qaida operating here (...) We can’t say there will never be al-Qaida operating here, but at least not for now,” Abu Shbak assured.⁵⁵ One of the Palestinians who was involved in the alleged plot, revealed details of how he was recruited at a press conference in Gaza – which was arranged by the Preventive Security. According to his story, the Palestinian security services started monitoring suspect telephone conversations after being alerted by one of the recruits in Gaza. The Palestinian investigation concluded that Israeli agents used fake Arab identities and contacted would-be recruits in Gaza by calling from Lebanese, Jordanian, and Israeli mobile numbers.⁵⁶

Israeli officials dismissed the allegations as – in the words of the Prime Minister’s spokesman Raanan Gissin – “sheer nonsense.”⁵⁷ However, Arab analysts who accepted the Palestinian version of the story did not hesitate to draw a parallel to previous Israeli ‘false flag’ terrorism, such as Mossad’s ‘Lavon Affair’ in 1954, arguing that such methods were not new to the Israeli secret services.⁵⁸

Israeli intelligence sources launched new allegations of Palestinian links with al-Qaida in 2003 after arresting Hamas members who allegedly had returned from an al-Qaida training facility in Afghanistan.⁵⁹ The same year, two U.K. nationals of Pakistani origin executed a suicide operation at Mike’s Place café in Tel Aviv. Prior to the operation they had visited Gaza where they had been recruited by Hamas, that later released a video in which the two operatives explained their

⁵³ “Israel says al-Qaeda active in Gaza.” *BBC News*, 5 December 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2546863.stm (accessed September 2008).

⁵⁴ Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, p.182.

⁵⁵ “Israel ‘faked al-Qaeda presence’,” *BBC News*, 8 December 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2550513.stm (accessed September 2008).

⁵⁶ Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, p. 184.

⁵⁷ “Israel ‘faked al-Qaeda presence’”.

⁵⁸ Israeli intelligence agents staged bomb attacks on American and British targets in Egypt. The violence was supposed to appear as Arab terrorist attacks. Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, p. 186.

⁵⁹ David Keyes, “Al-Qaeda Infiltration of Gaza: A Post-Disengagement Assessment”, Peace Watch no. 531, Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 December 2005, <http://www.thewashingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2421> (accessed September 2008).

motivation for conducting the operation.⁶⁰ Although Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack, the assailants had relations with al-Qaida as well. In London, the two operatives, Mohammed Hanif and Omar Sharif, had been active in the al-Qaida inspired al-Muhajiroun group, led by Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad,⁶¹ and belonged to the same milieu that were to carry out the multiple assaults on the London Underground two years later, on 7 July, 2005.⁶²

Jordanian authorities also detected activities among Palestinian students in Amman that indicated an attempt to set up an al-Qaida cell in Gaza in 2005.⁶³ In May that year, the Palestinian Azzam Abu al-Adas from Nablus was allegedly recruited by al-Qaida operatives Abdullah and Mo'taz Omar Seelawi. Azzam was instructed to set up a terrorist cell in Gaza to attack Israeli industrial facilities. Azzam recruited Bilal Hafanawi – a former Hamas activist and the leader of a Fatah/al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade cell in Gaza – to implement the plan. Abu al-Adas and Hafanawi were arrested as they entered the West Bank and were tried in an Israeli military court.⁶⁴

In parallel with what appeared as emerging al-Qaida activities among the Palestinians, a series of devastating terrorist attacks hit a range of tourist resorts in the Sinai peninsula in the period 2004–2006: 34 people were killed by simultaneous bomb attacks in Taba and Nuweiba in October 2004; 88 were killed in a similar triple bomb attack in Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005; and an attack in Dahab in April 2006 claimed 19 lives.⁶⁵ Several of the targets were popular resorts among Israeli tourists and the attack in Taba was targeted directly at Israelis. The main suspect for the Sinai campaign was al-Tawheed wa al-Jihad (Unity and Jihad), a group with members from a Bedouin tribe with a history of resistance against the Israeli occupation of the Sinai. Egyptian authorities claimed that the group was influenced by al-Qaida's methods and ideology and most probably had implemented al-Qaida's *modus operandi* through videotaped declarations made by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri.⁶⁶

The question of a possible Palestinian role in the wave of terrorist attacks in the Sinai was brought up when Egyptian police in May 2006 arrested three Palestinians suspected of aiding al-Tawheed wa al-Jihad. The Egyptian government claimed that at least one of the group's militants had been in Gaza and received training in the use of explosives.⁶⁷ Further investigation concluded that the three detained Palestinians were Hamas members who admitted that they had links with al-

⁶⁰ "Bomb Britons appear on Hamas Tape", *BBC News*, 8 March, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3543269.stm> (accessed September 2008).

⁶¹ Claudio Franco, "The day I met suicide bomber", *The Guardian*, 3 May 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/terrorism/story/0,12780,948749,00.html> (accessed September 2008); and Sarah Lyall, "What Drove 2 Britons to Bomb a Club in Tel Aviv?", *New York Times*, 12 May 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/12/international/europe/12BRIT.html?th> (accessed September 2008).

⁶² Yoram Schweitzer, "Is al-Qaeda Closing In?" *Strategic Assessment* (Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University), Vol. 10, No. 1, June 2007.

⁶³ *Al Hayat*, 4 April 2006, cited in Murad al-Shishani and Abdul Hameed Bakier, "Al-Qaeda's Presence in the Territories", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. IV, Issue 11 (April 2006), pp. 148–9.

⁶⁴ al-Shishani and Bakier, "Al-Qaeda's Presence in the Territories".

⁶⁵ Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, pp 173–4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp 174.

⁶⁷ "'Gaza Link' to Egypt bombings", *BBC News*, 23 May 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/5009170.stm (accessed November 2008).

Tawheed wa al-Jihad. Hamas had accorded protection to some of those involved in the two-year wave of suicide bombings in the Sinai, and a highly experienced Hamas explosives expert had allegedly been smuggled into Egypt by the head of al-Tawheed wa al-Jihad.⁶⁸ The alleged Palestinian involvement with terrorist activities in the Sinai created a serious strain on the diplomatic relations between Egypt and the Hamas movement.⁶⁹ The trend within al-Qaida towards an increased interest in Israeli targets was taken one step further on 19 August, 2005, when a Katyusha rocket was fired from Jordanian territory and landed near Israel's airport in the Red Sea town of Eilat. The attack was claimed by the Abdullah al-Azzam Brigades of the al-Qaida Organization in the Levant and Egypt.⁷⁰ Four months later, on 27 December, another rocket attack was launched on Northern Israel from Lebanon. This time responsibility was claimed by Al-Qaida in the Land of Two Rivers (al-Qaida in Iraq).⁷¹ The rocket attacks represented a significant change, as it was the first time al-Qaida operatives perpetrated such attacks on Israeli territory.

Furthermore, the rocket attacks across Israel's borders occurred approximately at the same time as – and were possibly coordinated with – what appeared as fresh salafi-jihadi activities within the Palestinian territories. On 2 August, 2005, the 'military wing' of a group presenting itself as *Alwiyyat al-Jihad fi Ard al-Ribat* (The Jihad Brigades in the Land of the Outpost) declared its responsibility for two separate attacks using Sajil rockets against two Israeli Gaza settlements, one at Neve Dekalim and another at Ganne Tal. The Iraqi built Sajil is a self-propelled rocket with a significantly longer range than the home-made Qassam rockets that have become more commonly used by militants in Gaza against Israeli targets. The rocket attacks, which had taken place two days earlier, were described as "carried out in the context of the Islamic Jihad by our mujahideen brothers of al-Qaida's World Organisation against the Jews and Crusaders." The declaration was posted on the salafi-jihadi internet forum of al-Mustaqbal al Islami (Islamic Future). It explained that

The brigades are not a new or passing organization in the land of Palestine, but a [true] believer spirit that urges the mujahideen to make themselves into a single rank... that empowers the mujahideen and fortifies them from sliding into the snares of politicians who trade in blood and who seek after worldly prestige under the banner of traitors, corrupt ones and atheists ... we will not allow anyone to end the jihad in the Land of the Outpost. God willing we will continue our jihad on the

⁶⁸ Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, pp. 176–7.

⁶⁹ Egyptian intelligence chief General Omar Suleiman presented Hamas' Interior Minister Said Siam with documents detailing the plot behind the Sinai attacks and the confessions of the three Hamas members. See Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, p. 177.

⁷⁰ "3 rockets hit Eilat, Aqaba", *Ynet News*, 19 August 2005, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3130154,00.html> (accessed November 2008).

⁷¹ "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Claims Responsibility for Launching Rockets Into Israel", *SITE Institute*, 29 December 2005.

enemies of Almighty God, until the occupier is swept from all of our blessed land, onwards toward victory over mortal men or toward God among the immortals.⁷²

In sum, these operations, targeting Israelis and Jews abroad, Israelis in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Israel proper appeared as a clear sign of al-Qaida's desire for playing a more active role in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

This string of attacks on Israeli targets by what appeared to be al-Qaida – or groups inspired by al-Qaida – came just as Israel was preparing to implement its unilateral decision to 'disengage' from the Gaza Strip in August 2005, meaning evacuating all Israeli settlers and withdrawing its military forces to the pre-1967 line between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Against the background of this new strategic situation, there were renewed discussions within the Israeli security establishment as to whether al-Qaida would try to take advantage of the absence of the IDF in the Gaza Strip. Following the evacuation of Israeli security forces along the Egypt-Gaza border, the head of Israeli military intelligence claimed that about ten "activists from the global jihad" had taken advantage of a border breach and infiltrated into the Gaza Strip.⁷³

Although smuggling and infiltration may have increased following the Israeli departure from the Egypt-Gaza border, it is worth noting that this border has been a porous one for decades. A network of tunnels was built under the border in the early 1980s and has been used continuously since then for the smuggling of goods, arms, money and people.⁷⁴

At a later stage, following Hamas's election victory in January 2006, PA President Mahmoud Abbas also supported the claim that al-Qaida operatives were present in the Palestinian territories. "We have signs of an al-Qaida presence in the West Bank and Gaza," Abbas told the London-based al-Hayat newspaper in March 2006. However, the substance of the claim remained vague, as he did not elaborate and he said that the Palestinian security forces had not captured any al-Qaida operatives.⁷⁵ After the military takeover of Gaza by Hamas in June 2007, Abbas blamed Hamas explicitly for the alleged presence of al-Qaida: "Through Hamas, al-Qaida is entering the Gaza Strip (...) It is Hamas that is protecting al-Qaida, and through its bloody behaviour Hamas has become very close to al-Qaida," he said in a television interview.⁷⁶ Again, the accusations were still not accompanied by evidence, and the comments appeared as a response to al-Qaida

⁷² Originally posted at www.islamic-f.net, cited in Stephen Ulph, "Al-Qaeda expanding into Palestine?" *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 2, Issue 15 (5 August 2005), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=543&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=238&no_cache=1 (accessed November 2008).

⁷³ David Keyes, "Al-Qaeda Infiltration of Gaza: A Post-Disengagement Assessment", *Peace Watch*, No. 531, Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 December 2005, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2421> (accessed October 2008).

⁷⁴ Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, p. 178.

⁷⁵ "Abbas: Qaeda Is In Gaza, West Bank", *CBS/AP*, 2 March 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/03/02/world/printable1362344.shtml> (accessed October 2008).

⁷⁶ "Hamas is giving al Qaeda foothold in Gaza: Abbas", *Reuters*, 9 July 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSL0990890220070709> (accessed October 2008).

leader Ayman al-Zawahiri who had issued declarations of support for Hamas in its battle with Abbas, urging Muslim fighters to back Hamas with funds and weapons.⁷⁷

While the organisational links between Palestinian organisations and al-Qaida remained vague, individual expression of sympathy with al-Qaida was exhibited in several ways in Gaza in the years following the September 11 attacks. The portrait of bin Laden could be seen in taxis and on the walls of hair dresser saloons in Gaza.⁷⁸ Friday prayers would openly express support for salafi-jihadi leaders. For instance, Sheikh Abu Noor al-Maqdasi delivered the following statement in his Friday sermon on May 19, 2006 in the Ibn Taymiyah Mosque:

This criminal country [USA] forgot that from among the tears and blood that they spilled throughout the years arose a new, devout pulse! A new, devout pulse that will show them the law, that has long escaped them! This new, devout pulse includes the troops of Mullah Muhammad Omar, Sheikh Osama bin Laden, Doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri, Sheikh Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi.⁷⁹

7 Salafi-jihadi violence in Gaza

Salafi-jihadi activities became increasingly visible in the Palestinian territories from 2006 and were not limited to competing with established resistance movements in hitting Israeli targets. Both the PA and symbols of Western decadence and non-Islamic culture within Palestinian society have become legitimate targets justified by speeches and fatwas of salafi-jihadi ideologues. Furthermore, the activists of this new trend of salafi-jihadism did not seem to be organised in any overarching structure. Rather, they operated in a number of different groups – or, alternatively, operated under different names which in many cases seemed to function more as tags of *ad hoc* operations than real organisations. These names appeared in a myriad of communiqués, usually posted on password-protected jihadi forums on the Internet, claiming responsibility for various military or violent operations or expressing opinions on pressing political issues.

The authenticity of such communiqués could often not be verified. For instance, when “al-Qaida in Palestine” in a communiqué claimed responsibility for an attempted assassination of the PA intelligence chief, Tariq Abu Rajab, in May 2006, the validity of this claim was questioned by members on the al-Qaida-affiliated forum, al-Hesbah.⁸⁰

During the winter of 2007 Gaza witnessed an unprecedented violent campaign against what salafi-jihadis commonly refer to as symbols of ‘immorality and decadence’. A previously

⁷⁷ “Al-Qaeda’s Zawahiri Voices Support for Hamas”, *AFP*, cited in *Daily News Egypt*, 26 June 2008, <http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=7904> (accessed October 2008).

⁷⁸ Observed by the author in 2002.

⁷⁹ “The Cutting Sword in Defense of the Leaders of Jihad” – A Video Sermon by Sheikh Abu Noor al-Maqdasi at Ibn Taymiyah Mosque in Palestine,” *SITE Institute*, 30 May 2006.

⁸⁰ “Chatter Concerning a Claim of Responsibility for the Attempted Assassination of a Palestinian Intelligence Chief by al-Qaeda in Palestine”, *SITE Intelligence Group*, 23 May 2006.

unknown group, the Righteous Sword – *Sayf al-Haqq* – claimed responsibility for many of the more than 40 attacks on Internet cafes and video shops that were blown up or burned down in that period.⁸¹ Among the targets was also the only Christian bookstore in Gaza, which was operated by the Palestinian Protestant Holy Bible Society. On April 15, 2007, Palestinian police reported that the bookstore was damaged in a bomb attack, with no claim of responsibility. Following a show of popular support by a pro-bookshop rally, the Bible Society reopened the shop. However, six months after the first assault, the Palestinian Christian owner of the bookshop, Rami Ayyad, was kidnapped and then stabbed and shot to death.⁸²

The Huda Army Organization is another group that has threatened to kill Christians. In a leaflet distributed in September 2006, the organisation warned that it would attack churches and Christian-owned institutions and homes. “We will target all crusaders in the Gaza Strip,” the leaflet read.⁸³

In another incident, on May 6, more than 70 ‘salafi activists’ stormed an UNRWA school in Rafah due to rumours of folklore dancing going on there. PA sources blamed al-Qaida activists for the incident in which one person was killed.⁸⁴

However, attacks on symbols of ‘un-Islamic’ or ‘Western’ culture are not a new phenomenon in Gaza. During the first days of the second intifada, in early October 2000, Palestinian activists burned down two cafés and some months later, the Windmill Hotel, presumably because these places were known to sell alcohol.⁸⁵

In a further manifestation of the rise of anti-Western sentiments in the Gaza Strip, Westerners became a target for kidnapping. There were 24 cases of foreigners being kidnapped from 2004 to 2006.⁸⁶ However, most of these cases were apparently not orchestrated by any ‘Islamic’ or salafi-jihadi group. In the first cases, no groups claimed responsibility, and the perpetrators were said to be armed gangs demanding money or jobs from the Palestinian Authority, rather than Islamic

⁸¹ “Bombs hit Christian bookshop, Internet cafe in Gaza”, *Reuters*, 15 April 2007, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUKL1558776820070415> (accessed October 2008).

⁸² “Prominent Palestinian Christian killed in Gaza,” *Reuters*, 7 October 2007, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKL0759985720071007> (accessed October 2008). Some 3,000 Christians live among 1.5 million Muslims in Gaza. Relations between the two communities have traditionally been good.

⁸³ “Terror Group threatens Gaza Christians”, *Jerusalem Post*, 19 September 2006, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?c=JPost&cid=1157913663155&pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FShowFull> (accessed November 2008). These threats came as a response to remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, that provoked negative reactions across the Muslim world. See “Pope’s Islam comments condemned”, *CNN World online*, 15 September 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/09/15/pope.islam/index.html> (accessed November 2008).

⁸⁴ “PA official: al-Qaida attacked school”, *Jerusalem Post*, 6 May 2007 <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?apage=1&cid=1178431583621&pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FShowFull> (accessed October 2008).

⁸⁵ The attacks on the cafes were witnessed by the author, Gaza, 4 October 2000.

⁸⁶ “Kidnapped Gaza Journalist freed”, *BBC News*, 24 October 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6079768.stm (accessed October 2008).

radicals. Some also demanded the release of jailed relatives in Palestinian prisons.⁸⁷ In October 2005, Palestinian security officials revealed that renegade members of the ruling Fatah movement were behind the abduction of a U.S. reporter and a British photographer, who were held some hours in captivity before Fatah officials and Palestinian security officers negotiated their release.⁸⁸ Also, an armed group linked to the secular Marxist oriented Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine claimed, in March 2006, responsibility for one of the abductions. The first claim of responsibility from a group with an Islamic label was in August 2006, when the Holy Jihad Brigades, a previously unknown group, said it was behind the kidnapping of two Fox News reporters, who were kept almost two weeks before they were released unharmed.⁸⁹ However, the most serious case was that of BBC-reporter Alan Johnston who was held 114 days in captivity, from March to July 2007, by the Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), which gradually appeared as one of the leading forces among salafi-jihadists in the Gaza Strip.

It is worth noting that this type of hostile action against foreigners is a completely new phenomenon in the Palestinian territories. The use of kidnapping as a weapon may have been inspired by the war evolving in Iraq, where armed insurgents systematically kidnapped, and brutally killed, Western foreigners. The U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq provoked massive condemnation among broad segments of the Palestinian population. Although all the hostages in Gaza were eventually released alive, and the campaign was subsequently brought to an end (or at least a halt) in July 2007, these incidents carry a strong message of anti-western resentment among Palestinian armed groups with the commitment and capability to act. As the overview above shows, the row of abductions from 2004 to 2007 was hardly a coordinated offensive organised by salafi-jihadists. However, it indicates that the environment is fertile for the further growth of the salafi-jihadi ideology and organisations in Gaza.

8 Hamas military takeover of the Gaza Strip

Following a year of frequent clashes between rivalling Hamas-loyal paramilitary forces on the one hand and Fatah-supported PA security forces on the other, Hamas forces finally launched a bloody offensive in June 2007 that ended with Hamas forces conquering the entire Gaza Strip and taking control from the PA security forces. Hamas's position as the *de facto* authority in Gaza has radically changed the working environment for salafi-jihadi elements. These radical groups had flourished under the lawless anarchy that existed during the months of bitter power struggle between Hamas and Fatah. However, after Hamas took firm control in the strip by force, the security situation improved. This author had the chance to witness the change that occurred during three separate fieldwork visits in Gaza – in March and August, 2007, and in March/April 2008. In March 2007, people largely stayed at home, scared by the masked militiamen from

⁸⁷ Author's interview with retired PA security officer, Gaza, August 2007.

⁸⁸ See overview of cases of abducted journalists and claims of responsibility on the web page of the Committee to Protect Journalists, "Journalists Abducted Gaza Strip 2004-07", <http://cpj.org/2007/03/journalists-abducted-gaza-strip-200407-bbc-corresp.php> (accessed November 2008).

⁸⁹ "Forty Days since BBC's Alan Johnston was kidnapped in Gaza", *Reporters Without Borders online*, http://www.rsf.org/article.php?id_article=21841 (accessed November 2008); and "Holy Jihad Brigades Release Statement", *SITE Intelligence Group*, 24 August 2006.

Fatah's al-Aqsa Brigades and from Hamas's Executive Force or Izzedin al-Qassam Brigades that were dominating the streets of their respective parts of Gaza City. However, following the Hamas take-over, city life was more or less back to normal, with the Executive Forces keeping a notably low profile in the streets. Even Gaza residents critical of Hamas, who were interviewed for this study, would usually give Hamas credit for having re-established a sense of security – with the exception of Fatah activists who feared being arrested.

There are different interpretations of why the salafi-jihadi style of violence declined with the Hamas takeover. Hamas officials disclaim any relations with the elements behind this violence; they unambiguously condemn their activities, which they maintain are both against all Islamic principles, and, furthermore, unquestionably damaging to the interests of Hamas. “Those people flourished when we had total chaos in Gaza. After Hamas took over, we never heard anything from these people,” argued Ahmed Yousef, advisor to Hamas Prime Minister Haniye, two months after Hamas's takeover.⁹⁰

However, others accused elements within the Hamas movement of being involved in – or possibly even staging – the chaos. An officer in the deposed PA General Intelligence Service in Gaza claimed that “the activists in *Sayf al-Haqq*, who attacked scores of CD-shops and Internet cafes were exclusively from Hamas”.⁹¹ The officer continued to receive his salary from Ramallah while being ordered to stay away from work after Hamas forces took over the premises of the General Intelligence in Gaza. A Palestinian NGO worker in Gaza who wanted to remain anonymous supported this analysis: “These attacks stopped after the Hamas take-over because these people belonged to Hamas and did not any longer have any incentive to make troubles when Hamas ruled Gaza alone,” he argued.⁹²

It turned out that the drop in salafi-jihadi violence was temporary as their activities re-emerged after some months. This trend does indeed weaken the suggestion that the perpetrators are tied to Hamas.

The previous head of the Palestinian Public Security Police, Nasr Youssef, doubted the authenticity of the many groups claiming to be affiliated with al-Qaida:

We don't know about any solid links between al-Qaida and any of the groups in Gaza. There are some Palestinian al-Qaida people in Israeli prisons, in PA prisons in the West Bank, and in Hamas prisons in Gaza. But the investigation, at least for those in Palestinian prisons, has only succeeded in showing that there are similarities between the suspected groups and al-Qaida. The existence of an organisational relationship has not been established.⁹³

⁹⁰ Author's interview with Ahmed Yousef, Gaza, 25 August, 2007.

⁹¹ Author's interview with the officer in his home, Gaza, 23 August, 2007.

⁹² Author's interview with Palestinian NGO employee, Gaza, April 2008.

⁹³ Author's interview with Nasr Youssef, Ramallah, 7 April, 2008.

Youssef, who is also the head of the security committee in Fatah, claimed that there may be some recruitment among Palestinians by Hezbollah, but not from al-Qaida. Asked about Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas's statements claiming there is actually an al-Qaida presence in Gaza and the West Bank, Youssef answered: "Mahmoud Abbas may have some information I don't have. But based on what I know, I don't see any real presence. We know that there are many people going to Gaza. There is training and cooperation between Hamas and Hezbollah, there is contact with Iran, yes – but with al-Qaida, no," maintained Youssef. The ex-public security chief also ruled out any relationship between Hamas and al-Qaida:

At least as long as Hamas remains within the fold of the Muslim Brotherhood, they don't need someone like [al-Qaida deputy Ayman] al-Zawahiri to lead them. Hamas is a reformist movement that would not be associated at all with the activities of al-Qaida. However, Hamas may make use of people like Jaysh al-Islam, in something they don't want to do themselves.⁹⁴

One of the most visible examples of an active, self-declared salafi-jihadi group in Gaza is Jaysh al-Islam – the Army of Islam, which is created by people from the Dughmush clan – one of the major clans in Gaza. It was involved in the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006 in a joint operation with the military wing of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam and the Popular Resistance Committee (which is an umbrella organisation of several armed groups in Gaza). In March 2007, the Army of Islam claimed responsibility for another kidnapping; this time of the British BBC correspondent Alan Johnston. While the PA police that ruled Gaza at the time failed to rescue him, Hamas secured his safe release within three weeks after its takeover of the Gaza Strip. By arresting several Dughmush leaders of the Army of Islam, the Hamas militia forced the salafi-jihadi group to accept a swap between their own leaders and the British journalist.

The story of the Army of Islam contains several interesting elements. Hamas apparently cooperated with the group in the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier Shalit, before the issue of Alan Johnston created a major crisis in the relationship between Hamas and the Army of Islam. Importantly, Hamas does not deny cooperation with the group at an early stage.⁹⁵ Marwan Abu Ras, a Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in Gaza, explains that "At that time when we cooperated with them [the Army of Islam] and we kidnapped Shalit, it wasn't clear that they carried any affiliation with al-Qaida. This came out after the kidnapping of Johnston, and then we cut off any relations with them."⁹⁶

Prof. Mkheimar Abusada at al-Azhar University who has written on Islamist movements in Palestine, confirmed that the name Jaysh al-Islam appeared for the first time with the operation to

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ A joint statement with regard to Shalit was issued on 26 June, 2006 by The Izzedin al-Qassam Brigades of Hamas, Naser Salah al-Din Brigades of the Popular Resistance Committees, and the Army of Islam. See "Hamas, Naser Salah el-Din Brigades, and the Islamic Army Issue Demands to be Met for Information Regarding a Captured Israeli Soldier", SITE Institute, 26. June 2006.

⁹⁶ Author's interview with Marwan Abu Ras, Gaza, 22 August 2007.

abduct Shalit, and that its affiliation with salafi-jihadi forces was disclosed when the kidnappers demanded the release of two al-Qaida suspects: Abu Qatada al-Falastini, the previously mentioned Jordanian-Palestinian who is in British detention, and Sajida al-Rishawi, a female sentenced to death in Jordan for her alleged part in suicide bombings against hotels in Amman in 2005.⁹⁷ The leader of the Army of Islam, Abu Muhammad al-Ansari – better known as Mumtaz Dughmush – is known for having switched allegiance between Fatah and Hamas in the past. “Mumtaz Dughmush used to work for Hamas, but it is believed that he switched to [head of Preventive Security in Gaza] Muhammed Dahlan and came into confrontation with Hamas following an incident in which some from the Dughmush clan was killed by Hamas activists,” said Abusada. Furthermore, commonly heard rumours in Gaza say that members of the Dughmush clan in the past operated like a criminal gang – sometimes on behalf of others.

Mumtaz Dughmush, for his part, has denied any link to Dahlan saying he was actually very close to the Hamas leadership. He also claimed that he and Hamas had planned to assassinate Dahlan at least five times in the past. He maintained that the Army of Islam did not consist only of members of the Dughmush clan. Without referring to al-Qaida, he said that “this is a group that is based on the principle of jihad.”⁹⁸

There are conflicting views within Hamas about the nature of the linkage between Mumtaz Dughmush’s Army of Islam and al-Qaida. Izzat al-Rashaq, member of Hamas Political Bureau maintained that “the Army of Islam consists of people who we believe have al-Qaida thoughts. Maybe there is also a beginning of a relationship with al-Qaida. Their demand of having Abu Qatada freed in exchange for Alan Johnston is an indication of some kind of relations.”⁹⁹ However, according to an Israeli source, the leader of the cell that abducted Alan Johnston was Khattab al-Maqdasi, a veteran from Afghanistan who fought alongside the Taliban. If that is the case, he may indeed represent a link between the clan-based Army of Islam in Gaza and the al-Qaida leaders abroad.¹⁰⁰

Ex-public security head Nasr Youssef refuted that the demand of Abu Qatada’s release represented any sort of valid evidence of a relationship with al-Qaida. “The Dughmush family just wanted money. In Palestinian society it is very shameful to kidnap somebody for money, therefore they claimed an exchange with this al-Qaida prisoner in the UK, but in reality they asked for – and got – money,” Youssef explained.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Author’s interview with Mkhaimar Abusada, Gaza, 22 August 2007.

⁹⁸ “Gaza clan chief holds onto Johnston”, *Jerusalem Post*, 22 June 2007, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1182409612071> (accessed September 2008).

⁹⁹ Author’s interview with Izzat al-Rashaq, Damascus, 30 August, 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Dahoah-Halevi, “‘The Army of the Nation’ - Another Al-Qaeda Affiliate in the Gaza Strip”, *Jerusalem Issue Briefs*, Vol. 7, No. 12, Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 7 August 2007, <http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=1&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=379&PID=0&IID=1748&TTL=‘The Army of the Nation’ - Another Al-Qaeda Affiliate in the Gaza Strip> (accessed December 2008).

¹⁰¹ Author’s interview with Nasr Youssef, Ramallah, 7 April, 2008.

Other Hamas officials believe the significance of the Army of Islam has been exaggerated and that their alleged relation with al-Qaida is claimed for propaganda purposes. According to their view, the Army of Islam is entirely a local phenomenon, a new name on an “armed gang” within the Dughmush clan of Gaza, and is rooted in personal conflicts between the leaders of this clan, supporters of Muhammed Dahlan and Hamas members. “It is the media that has made these Dughmush people look more important than they are. They try to use the al-Qaida label to look more powerful” said Jamal Iskaik, Hamas representative in the PLC.¹⁰² This claim is supported by a source in the Palestinian salafi-jihadi organisation Usbat al-Ansar in Lebanon, which is believed to have developed strong ties with al-Qaida. One of their commanders in the Ein el-Hilwah refugee camp outside Saida, known as ‘Abu Sharif’, confirmed that “there are some salafi forces in Palestine. We are in contact with them. But they are not Jaysh al-Islam [Army of Islam]; that is just a ‘theatre’. Jaysh al-Islam can probably attract many members and grow bigger. But ideologically, they are not strong,” explained ‘Abu Sharif’, while he declined to disclose who he considers to be the ‘real’ salafi representative in Palestine.¹⁰³ He believes that there is great potential for the salafi-jihadis to become stronger in the future, and claims that Hamas people are also receptive to their message: “The Palestinians are religious people. When there are problems piling up in front of them, like today, they turn to Allah for solution and rescue. We have seen that some people from Hamas have also joined the salafis,” he said.

One rare, documented case of a disillusioned Hamas member leaving the organisation was Rami Abu Nazar Abdullah Swayrah (AKA Abu Hudhayfa) who was declared a “martyr” by both Hamas and the Army of Islam on June 19, 2008. In a video that was released in Gaza following his death, he labels the Hamas leadership as “tyrants” and declares their laws, courts, method and constitution “filthy”.¹⁰⁴ This case of ‘conversion’ may well have been affected by a call by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, head of the Islamic State in Iraq, who encouraged members of Izzedin al-Qassam Brigades to separate from the Hamas leadership.¹⁰⁵ Al-Baghdadi’s speech, which was issued in February 2008, indicates to what extent the al-Qaida leadership has adopted an offensive strategy in challenging Hamas’s dominant position among Palestinian Islamists.

Another group, Army of the Nation – *Jaysh al-Umma* – has been concerned with the “Shiite threat” to Sunni Muslims, an issue frequently brought up within the salafi-jihadi discourse. In a video clip distributed by Jaysh al-Umma, it is argued that Iran has converted Palestinian Islamic Jihad into a Shiite branch that will be used as a tool to advance the spread of Shiism.¹⁰⁶ The Army of the Nation is led by Abu Hafs al-Maqdisi, who says that his group is not part of al-Qaeda, but maintains that “there is an ideological bond between our brothers in al-Qaida and ourselves.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Author’s interview with Jamal Iskaik, 23 August, 2007.

¹⁰³ Author’s interview with Abu Sharif, Ein el-Hilweh, 5 September, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ “Former Hamas Member Decries Leadership”, *The Official Newsletter of SITE Intelligence Group*, Vol. I, No. 4 (2008), p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Dahoah-Halevi, “The Army of the Nation”.

¹⁰⁷ Fadhil Ali, “Hamas Arrests Pro-al-Qaeda Leader of Jaysh al-Umma in Gaza”, *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 5, Issue 34, 24 September 2008.

Abu Hafis organised public training sessions of his armed forces and has been arrested for his critical remarks on the alleged lack of Islamic rule under Hamas.¹⁰⁸

One significant development within the salafi-jihadi flora in the Gaza Strip was the emergence of the group Fatah al-Islam in the Land of Ribat [Palestine] in late 2007. In its first declaration, the group claimed to have launched two rockets at Israel and continued to claim rocket attacks the subsequent months.¹⁰⁹ Fatah al-Islam was established in Lebanon a year before and won high esteem among salafi-jihadis for its prolonged war with the Lebanese army in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared in North Lebanon during the summer of 2007. The group was established by Shakir al-Absi from the radical Palestinian faction Fatah al-Intifada and consisted of men from various militant Palestinian factions as well as from several Arab countries, many of whom had participated in the jihad in Iraq.¹¹⁰ Importantly, Absi's multi-national Fatah al-Islam had, from the outset, a strong contingent of Palestinian members with personal ties to Gaza, including the Gaza residents Abd al-Rahman al-Maqdisi and Abu Abdullah al-Maqdisi, who both fought and were killed in the battle of Nahr el Bared.

Fatah al-Islam's new branch in Palestine seems to be well organised. In January 2008, its Shura Council appointed an emir of the group, Sheikh Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Ghazawi; it manages to follow up its militant language with frequent rocket launches targeting Israel; and it has an efficient media branch, and maintains good relations with the al-Qaida linked media center al-Fajr, which has been supporting Fatah al-Islam in opposing Hamas in Gaza. Furthermore, it is of crucial importance for its boosted status among salafi-jihadis globally and locally that Ayman al-Zawahiri declared publicly that "the brothers in Fatah al-Islam are heroes of Islam."¹¹¹ For a long time, there was no clear indication of which one of the many jihadi groups was the al-Qaida leadership's preferred representative in the Palestinian territories; unlike the cases of Iraq and Algeria, the leadership has not proclaimed any *emir* – leader – responsible for Palestine. However, with Zawahiri's declaration, it is Fatah al-Islam that has been recognised as al-Qaida's preferred representative in Palestine.

The growing number of groups claiming adherence to salafi-jihadi principles, although with little or no coordination amongst them, has troubled the activists who see that unification of the forces would obviously increase the impact of the jihadi movement in Palestine. The issue of unity has been discussed from time to time on the jihadist Internet forums. In July 2008 a plan for rapprochement between the groups was posted on one of the sites.¹¹² The Army of Islam has also

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ "Fatah Al-Islam Movement Claims Resurgence in Palestine", *SITE Intelligence Group*, 4 December 2007; and "Fatah al-Islam Regroups in the Gaza Strip", *The Official Newsletter of SITE Intelligence Group*, Vol. I, No. 4 (2008), p. 9.

¹¹⁰ Tine Gade, *Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between Global and Local Jihad*, Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 2007, FFI-Rapport No. 2007/02727.

¹¹¹ "Fatah al-Islam Regroups in the Gaza Strip", *The Official Newsletter of SITE Intelligence Group*, Vol. I, No. 4 (2008), p. 9; and "Plan to Ultimately Unify Salafist Groups in Gaza", *SITE Intelligence Group*, 22 July 2008.

¹¹² "Plan to Ultimately Unify Salafist Groups in Gaza", *SITE Intelligence Group*, 22 July 2008.

called for unity in a message that was distributed by the Global Islamic Media Front, presenting a set of conditions for accepting unity. The Army of Islam invites not only all salafi groups in the region for unification, but also extends its call to Hamas and other resistance groups.¹¹³ Such initiatives are hardly seriously aimed at convincing the Hamas leadership to alter its positions; they are rather an attempt to attract the interest of the rank and file of Hamas.

9 Hamas's responses to the challenge of al-Qaida

The reactions from Hamas leaders to the verbal offensive from al-Qaida leaders have varied from harsh and outright rejection in the media, to rather defensive replies – sometimes even in an apologetic tone. For instance, when al-Qaida's Ayman al-Zawahiri, following Hamas's landslide victory in January 2006, urged Hamas never to make peace with Israel, the Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal answered that Hamas had "its own vision" and "did not need al-Qaida's advice", while Mahmoud al-Zahar, one of the hard-line founding fathers of Hamas in Gaza, responded to al-Zawahiri's comments by ensuring, as he explained to al-Jazeera, that "Entering these institutions does not mean that we will be a carbon copy of other factions".¹¹⁴ This was apparently an attempt to assure people that Hamas would not repeat the mistakes of Fatah, who, according to a common accusation from Hamas, capitulated and gave up the resistance without any guarantees for the outcome of negotiations and without any reciprocal concession from Israel. Zahar referred to the failed peace process as a "dirty game" and assured that "Hamas will not repeat it."¹¹⁵

According to Izzat al-Rashaq, Hamas is trying hard to convince any salafi-jihadi elements to change their mindset. "We try to treat their way of thinking, to convince them to leave the al-Qaida thoughts, by discussion and arguments. Maybe we will succeed, maybe we will fail. I think that if the situation continues as it is today I am afraid we cannot persuade anybody that our way of political participation will lead to any result."¹¹⁶

The religious authorities of the movement also say that they mobilise to prevent unfavourable tendencies from developing. Marwan Abu Ras, the head of *Rabitat 'Ulama*, the Palestinian Scholars League, and a Hamas legislator declared that:

I would like to explain to the international community and the Europeans that we are happy here in Gaza because the 'Ulama and the big sheikhs always explain to the young people the true content of the religion and this way they try to minimize the potential of people who may be radicalised.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ "Army of Islam Calls for Unity", *SITE Intelligence Group*, 28 August 2008.

¹¹⁴ "Hamas rejects al-Qaeda's support", *BBC News*, 5 March, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4776578.stm (accessed June 2008).

¹¹⁵ Interview with Mahmoud Zahar, Gaza, 18 March 2007.

¹¹⁶ Author's interview with Izzat al-Rashaq, Damascus, 30 August, 2007.

¹¹⁷ Author's interview with Marwan Abu Ras, Gaza, 30 March 2008.

Abu Ras, who is often referred to as the ‘ Hamas Mufti ’ because he frequently offers religious sanction to Hamas political structures, claimed that Hamas is ready to confront al-Qaida cells or any other salafi-jihadi groups head-on whenever that may be necessary. At the same time, he expressed reservations about interfering in opposition to them as long as they organise resistance activities against Israel:

We are now in a resistance stage. We cannot prevent any group that wants to resist the Israelis. We will be against them only when they leave the resistance and the struggle against the Israelis and start making problems for us here in the Palestinian society, by for instance, bombings, killings and kidnappings. What happened when they kidnapped Alan Johnston is a proof that we are against them. They were arrested and investigated until they released him.¹¹⁸

In other words, the issue of confronting al-Qaida appears to be a delicate dilemma: Hamas is not interested in being seen as a force hunting Islamic activists struggling against Israel. This is what they always criticised Fatah for in the 1990s when Fatah security forces were arresting Hamas resistance operatives, blaming them for conducting the ‘ dirty work of the occupation forces. ’ Thus, Hamas members will certainly feel uneasy at suddenly having become the actors doing that ‘ dirty work. ’

This logic may also apply to the ideological level. Even though Hamas sees al-Qaida as an unfortunate phenomenon, it is considered a direct outcome of what is perceived as American aggressive foreign policy. Accordingly, the US must bear the consequences of its aggression and should not expect any help from moderate Islamists. As the Hamas leader in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Hilweh in Lebanon said: “ We don ’ t see al-Qaida as a threat against us. We are Islamists and we will not fight against al-Qaida. That is not our task. It is US President Bush ’ s responsibility that such forces gain strength and they will have to handle them without our help. ”¹¹⁹

10 Al-Qaida’s impact on Hamas’s policy

The phenomenon of al-Qaida may have an impact in a number of different ways on the Palestinian political landscape and is not limited to the penetration of the Palestinian territories by al-Qaida operatives from outside who set up cells under the command of al-Qaida’s leadership. Local, Palestinian sympathisers of al-Qaida may establish cells without direct assistance from outside, using the methods known from their spiritual brothers in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both cases, supporters of such clandestine groups may be drawn partly from existing Palestinian organisations, thus threatening defections or splits within them. Furthermore, the ideology of global jihad may be adopted by, or affect the policies of, existing Palestinian nationalist organisations. That impact is not necessarily limited to Islamist organisations: the element of

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Author’s interview with Abu Ahmed Fadel, Hamas leader in Ein el-Hilweh, Lebanon, 5 September 2007.

transferring the war beyond the borders of Palestine and targeting the main supporters of Israel – the USA and the West – may also be taken up by non-religious organisations. The Fatah leader Husam Khader has warned against such a scenario: “Palestinian ‘revolutionaries’ who relinquished the path of war against Israel are liable to return as terrorists of the Al-Qaida type”, he said referring to Fatah activists who compromised on their goals without receiving anything in return from Israel.¹²⁰

Without exception, Hamas representatives interviewed for this study expressed detest for al-Qaida’s goals, methods and appearance. Jamal Iskaik, PLC member from Hamas in Gaza said “We in Hamas are totally against al-Qaida’s way of thinking and we will not tolerate their presence here in Palestine. We cannot accept seeing our cause disappear into the international war of al-Qaida. They try to exploit the Palestinian issue when some of their groups make some actions here and there – in other parts of the world.”¹²¹

Most Hamas leaders also seem to acknowledge that there is potential for growth of the salafi-jihadi trend among the Palestinians. At the same time, they usually reject the view that al-Qaida affiliated elements represent any immediate threat, dismissing them as too few and too weak to play any significant role. To the extent they admitted that there is indeed such a threat, they almost consistently linked it to the Western policy of boycott and isolation of the Hamas government, a policy which they unanimously claim has only strengthened militancy at all levels among the Palestinians.

Deputy Mayor in the West Bank city of Nablus, Mahdi Hanbali from Hamas, admitted that he fears that the frequent verbal attacks from Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaida leaders will have an impact on Hamas because of the broad anti-American sentiments among the Palestinians:

Al-Qaida is taking advantage of the very bad feelings among our people against the USA. Thus, you could find some people who were happy for what happened on 9/11. If the international community rejects dealing with Hamas, I am sure some Hamas members will be pushed to become al-Qaida members. This is why the boycott is pushing Hamas to become more extremist rather than more moderate.¹²²

Marwan Abu Ras maintained that although the phenomenon of al-Qaida is a challenge, it is less present in the Palestinian territories than in the neighbouring countries. “They are all over the region: in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. They are actually less here in Palestine,” claimed Abu Ras, who also pointed out that whatever exists of salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza, this is not related to the rule of Hamas. “They were here also during the time of Mahmoud Abbas,” he said.

¹²⁰ “Al-Qaida intifada could make Hamas look like child’s play”, *Haaretz*, 7 September 2008.

¹²¹ Author’s interview with Jamal Iskaik, Gaza, 23 August, 2007.

¹²² Author’s interview with Mahdi Hanbali, Nablus, 15 March, 2007.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Hamas leaders in Damascus. Izzat al-Rashaq, for instance, warned the US about the consequences of boycotting Hamas: “The Americans have to know that if they don’t deal with Hamas as a political actor in Palestine, they will have to deal with al-Qaida in the future. If the West continues to neglect Hamas, I am afraid this ideology will grow in the entire region,” said Izzat al-Rashaq in the first of two interviews, in March 2007.¹²³ At that point, he rejected the claim that al-Qaida represented any immediate threat on the ground. However, when he was interviewed half a year later, he was more willing to recognise not only a distant threat in the future, but also the existence of a rather immediate danger:

We have seen that al-Qaida has tried to find a place to operate in Gaza, like the Dughmush clan that has become very close to al-Qaida. The reason is that they were frustrated by the closure of all political roads: they saw Hamas trying the political option through elections, which was blocked by the international siege that was put on Hamas in Gaza. The result is that they are now spreading in Gaza.¹²⁴

Such warnings of the dangers posed by al-Qaida contain a double message: in addition to acknowledging that al-Qaida represents a challenge for Hamas, the threat of al-Qaida is used as a means to gain political leverage towards the West. Thus, it might be in Hamas’s interest to focus on – or even exaggerate – the threat of al-Qaida in an attempt to convince the Western powers to accept dealing with Hamas.

Other Hamas leaders dismiss completely the issue of a challenge from al-Qaida. “Al-Zawahiri’s statements are stupid and a detriment to the Palestinian cause. We will not be distracted by al-Qaida which has a completely different way of thinking than Hamas,” says Samira Halayka, Hamas legislator from Hebron.¹²⁵ Deputy leader of Hamas Political Bureau, Musa Abu Marzuq, stated firmly that “Believe me; we are never scared of any other Islamic group because we are weak. We want to represent our people, so we seek to enhance the interest of the Palestinian people without consideration of al-Qaida or any other radical group.” One of Hamas’s founding members in Gaza, Mahmoud Zahar, also denies vehemently that there are militants in Hamas that may be perceptive to al-Qaida ideas. “We have no radicals and no moderates in Hamas – these are your terms. We are not fundamentalists. We have faced some internal Palestinian challenges. But we are one unit and our movement is still committed to our goals,” Zahar stated.¹²⁶

While many observers have offered speculations of possible links between Hamas and al-Qaida, Hamas officials have blamed Fatah for supporting al-Qaida. According to Jamal Iskaik, Hamas is the party to suffer most from any alleged al-Qaida activities in the Palestinian territories. Therefore, Fatah is in a position to facilitate the growth of al-Qaida elements in order to discredit Hamas. “After the [2006] elections, many new, small groups mushroomed here in Gaza, maybe helped by Muhammad Dahlan, in order to create obstacles for Hamas and the government,” said

¹²³ Author’s interview with Izzat al-Rashaq, Damascus, 26 March, 2007.

¹²⁴ Author’s interview with Izzat al-Rashaq, Damascus, 30 August, 2007.

¹²⁵ Author’s interview with Samira Halayka, Hebron, 14 March, 2007.

¹²⁶ Author’s interview with Mahmoud Zahar, Gaza, 18 March, 2007.

Iskaik.¹²⁷ Hamas officials have also claimed that disgruntled Fatah policemen, who were ordered by President Abbas to stay at home following Hamas's takeover in Gaza, have joined al-Qaida groups. A source in the Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry [of the Gaza government] told journalists in November 2007 that "scores of Fatah policemen who used to serve in the Palestinian Authority security forces in the Gaza Strip have now joined the al-Qaida-affiliated group calling itself the Army of Islam."¹²⁸

One common denominator of Fatah and al-Qaida is their strained relations with Hamas. To the extent they want to see Hamas fail in ruling Gaza, they would constitute tactical allies. When Hamas entered into a bilateral ceasefire agreement with Israel on 19 June 2008, it faced the paradox that neither Fatah militia nor salafi-jihadi groups would support the agreement, while Hamas militants complied fully with the ceasefire.¹²⁹

Journalist and expert on Islamist issues Khalid Amayreh in the West Bank village of al-Dura is among those who believe al-Qaida is a force to be reckoned with, both in ideological and organisational terms:

The presence of al-Qaida in Gaza is real. There are maybe 20 persons in Palestinian and Israeli jails on suspicion of relations with al-Qaida; in some cases they have asserted their own affiliation to al-Qaida. Due to the strong position of Hamas, these elements are still few and weak. But when you limit the horizon of the moderates, you will have the militants on the rise. That happened also in Egypt when [President Hosni] Mubarak cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood; then emerged the [salafi-jihadi] group of *al-Takfir wa al-Hijra*. In the same way, the Israeli and Western pressure on Hamas will not make Hamas move towards Fatah or moderate its policies, but rather towards al-Qaida. Thus, the opposite of what is being sought is taking place.¹³⁰

It seems clear that al-Qaida may have an impact at two levels: one direct impact is through the creation of cells of activists linked to the al-Qaida network, thus establishing a new, physical presence that will upset the traditional balance within the spectrum of Palestinian political organisations. The other means of influence is the indirect impact that the global salafi-jihadi ideology may have on mainstream Palestinian Islamists within the camp of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas, whose leadership and members may be vulnerable to the massive pressure from al-Qaida's stream of propaganda targeting the Palestinian audience. This pressure may not only lead to splits and defections within Hamas, but more fundamentally, it may move the policy of Hamas to be more anti-Western, dogmatic and militant, and less flexible and

¹²⁷ Author's interview with Jamal Iskaik, Gaza, 23 August, 2007.

¹²⁸ "Fatah policemen 'defect to al-Qaida'", *Jerusalem Post*, 1 November, 2007, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1192380715974&pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull> (accessed November 2008).

¹²⁹ "Hamas: Qassam fire is harming Palestinian interests", *Haaretz*, 26 June 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/996294.html> (accessed November 2008).

¹³⁰ Author's interview with Khalid Amayreh, al-Dura, West Bank, 6 April 2008.

pragmatic. Such a policy shift may be a tactical move applied by the leadership as a way of adapting to the pressure and pacifying al-Qaida's criticism of Hamas's moderation related to its participation in parliamentary politics. But it may also mirror a genuine shift within the rank and file, increasingly disillusioned by what is perceived as Western one-sided backing of Israel, double standards in dealing with democratization, and resentment against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Several Hamas leaders expressed more worry about the political influence that the global salafi-jihadi ideology may have on Hamas itself than about the significance of al-Qaida as an organisation and the prospect of independent al-Qaida cells being established in the Palestinian territories. Nasreddin al-Shaer, the education minister and Deputy Prime Minister in Hamas's first government, assured that:

If anything called al-Qaida would rise in Gaza, I think Hamas will not hesitate to attack them because Hamas is not interested in giving the whole world the excuse that there is al-Qaida in Gaza. However, my worry is that Hamas itself, if the whole world puts a lot of pressure on them, might choose a policy that seems close to al-Qaida. Even if they are not al-Qaida and there is no real al-Qaida presence in Gaza – which I believe is still the situation – the [external] pressure makes the political person very weak and the militant person very powerful. That is the danger.¹³¹

Asked about whether Hamas may change its military strategy to include attacking Western targets, he dismissed this as an unrealistic scenario. He agreed there are more extreme elements in Hamas in Gaza than in the West Bank and that if Hamas in Gaza was left isolated from the other branches of the movement, this type of extremism could emerge from within. But he was confident that “as long as Hamas keeps working together as one organisation, discussing issues between the branches in Gaza, the West Bank and in exile, they will be safe from that kind of extremism.” Al-Shaer emphasised that the important issue is whether there is an atmosphere that helps extremist ideas grow and become strong, while he is less concerned with the name of the organisations: “The important thing is if the subject of extremism is there, not what you call it. To me it doesn't matter if they belong to al-Qaida, or whether they take orders from bin Laden or not. What we are afraid of is that such extremism – the idea itself – might find a place here.”¹³²

Hamas's unconstitutional takeover of the Gaza Strip may reflect a stronger role for the militant faction of Hamas at the expense of the moderates. Moderate Hamas leaders, such as Nasr el-Din al-Shaer, Ahmed Yousef and Ghazi Hamad, all admit that the new situation has weakened their position as promoters of a pragmatic political program. Yousef complained that he had “lost any credibility as a source of political change” after having pushed his followers to accept political compromises while failing to achieve the gains he promised would materialise.¹³³

Hamas held internal elections to the Shura Council in August 2008 which indicated that the moderation process that Hamas underwent as a result of its political participation had been

¹³¹ Author's interview with Nasr el-Din al-Shaer, Nablus, 27 August 2007.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Author's interviews.

brought to a halt. Some of the veteran leaders, who have been the driving force behind the democratic experiment of Hamas, suffered a defeat at the hands of the young guard of militants of the second intifada.¹³⁴

Furthermore, the takeover of Gaza aroused different reactions from the salafi-jihadi radicals. In contrast to the massive criticism that hit Hamas through its past two years of political manoeuvres, the victory of Hamas forces over the ‘infidels’ in Fatah was rejoiced by different salafi-jihadi figures. Al-Zawahiri extended an invitation to Hamas to “join ranks with the *mujahideen* around the world in order to repel the attack on Gaza, that is sure to come soon.” He also called on the mujahideen throughout the world to extend military and economic assistance to Hamas, and to attack “Zionist interests” everywhere.¹³⁵

The congratulations from al-Qaida were probably more an expression of an attempt to capitalise on the popularity and strength of Hamas, than of any expectation of a new, strategic alliance with Hamas. According to Palestinian analyst Khalil Shikaki at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, “people like al-Zawahiri are using the Palestinian cause as a tool to bolster their own support and legitimacy – much the same way as various Arab nationalist leaders did some decades ago.”¹³⁶

With Hamas fully in control of the Gaza Strip, al-Zawahiri urged Hamas to use the opportunity to “enforce the law of Allah” in the territory.¹³⁷ Jaysh al-Islam, reportedly calling on Hamas to announce an Islamic Emirate in Gaza, offered its soldiers to “serve the Islamic Emirate’s army.”¹³⁸ However, Hamas officials have repeatedly assured that Hamas has no intention to impose its religious and social program on the public. Ahmed Yousef emphasised that Hamas respects the legitimacy of the laws and the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, and that the Hamas government has no wish to apply any constitutional changes to the Palestinian institutions following its takeover in Gaza.¹³⁹

The good news in this undesirable situation, according to Nasr el-Din al-Shaer, is that there are two factors that may reduce the probability of al-Qaida getting a foothold in the Palestinian territories. One is the fact that there are no Shiite Muslims and no American troops in Palestine: “Al-Qaida struggles mainly against the Shiites and against the Americans. In Afghanistan and

¹³⁴ “Hamas reportedly ups ante for Schalit”, *Jerusalem Post*, 29 August, 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1219913192489&pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FShowFull> (accessed November 2008).

¹³⁵ “Al-Qaeda Deputy Ayman Al-Zawahiri Calls on Hamas to Enforce the Shari’a in Gaza; Urges Mujahideen to Attack Zionist Interests Throughout the World”, *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series* No. 1634, 26 June 2007, <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP163407> (accessed October 2008).

¹³⁶ Author’s interview with Khalil Shikaki, Ramallah, 26 August 2007.

¹³⁷ “Al-Qaeda Deputy Ayman Al-Zawahiri Calls on Hamas to Enforce the Shari’a in Gaza”.

¹³⁸ “Jaysh Al-Islam to Hamas’s ‘Izz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades: Announce Establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Gaza”, *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series* – No. 1641, 29 June 2007, <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP164107> (accessed October 2008).

¹³⁹ Author’s interview with Ahmad Yousef, Gaza, 27 March 2008.

Iraq you have Shiites and you have Americans. But here in Palestine there are no Shiites and no Americans, so I think the atmosphere is not suitable for them.” The other factor is the presence of an active Palestinian resistance:

We have seen that al-Qaida establishes itself in areas where they can dominate the ground because there are no other strong groups. However, in Palestine there are Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and many other armed groups. So why would people join al-Qaida when they already have all these groups fighting the occupation? But we don't know in the future: If Hamas starts relying more on talking politics and comes very close to recognising Israel and becomes engaged in a dialogue with the US, this would be very beneficial to al-Qaida.¹⁴⁰

This point suggests that the success of al-Qaida is directly dependent on the fate of the political process that Hamas has sought to be a part of. If that is the case, the most fertile period for al-Qaida to win sympathisers among the Palestinians would be when Hamas is engaged in a political process or international diplomacy, while when it is preoccupied with resistance, there would supposedly be less space for al-Qaida.

Another implication of this reasoning is that Israel, within the green line, constitutes a suitable area of operations for al-Qaida, as there is no armed resistance among the Palestinian minority in Israel. As mentioned above, Israeli police found that the first Palestinian al-Qaida suspect, who was arrested in 2000, had indeed tried to recruit Israeli Arabs. More recently, Israeli police have arrested a number of Israeli Arabs on suspicion of relations with al-Qaida or planning attacks ‘inspired’ by al-Qaida. In December 2007, two Israeli Arabs from Jaljulya in North Israel were arrested for planning “al-Qaida inspired attacks” on Israeli targets. The suspects admitted in interrogation that they had been influenced by surfing global jihad Web sites.¹⁴¹ In July 2008, two Palestinian Israeli citizens and four Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem were arrested for links with al-Qaida and for planning to attack the helicopter of U.S. President George W. Bush during one of his visits to Israel.¹⁴² Later the same month, two Israeli Bedouin were accused of spying on behalf of al-Qaida by passing strategic information on possible targets for terrorist attacks, including Ben Gurion Airport and towers in Tel Aviv, to al-Qaida contacts abroad.¹⁴³ Furthermore, in August, yet another Israeli-Palestinian man was indicted on suspicion of trying to set up a suicide operation cell in Israel and for contact with an alleged agent of al-Qaida in Gaza.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ “Police: We exposed Israeli al-Qaida cell”, *Jerusalem Post*, 9 July 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1215330914157&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull> (accessed October 2008).

¹⁴² “Al-Qaida in Israel / Fertile ground for terrorism”, *Haaretz*, 20 July 2008, <http://haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1003470.html> (accessed October 2008).

¹⁴³ “Family of Israeli Al-Qaida suspects: They're no terrorists”, *Haaretz*, 9 July 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1000598.html> (accessed October 2008).

¹⁴⁴ “Israeli Arab charged with planning attacks with Al-Qaida”, *Jerusalem Post*, 22 August 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1219218618703&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull> (accessed October 2008).

From an Israeli perspective, these cases are extremely worrisome, not only because of the possible emergence of al-Qaida as a new enemy within its borders. The mobilisation of Israeli-Palestinians into anti-Israeli violence represents in itself a qualitative shift from the security threats posed by guerrilla or terrorist activities originating from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as it dramatically reduces the value of Israel's strategy of providing security through physical separation from the territories by walls and fences. Israel's General Security Service (GSS) has for some time detected increased Israeli-Arab solidarity and identification with enemy organisations such as Hizbullah and Hamas. The GSS reported in 2007 that 21 Arab-Israeli terror cells were uncovered in 2006, up from 17 terror cells in 2005. Based on these findings, an internal GSS document warned that Israel's Arab population is a "genuine long-range danger to the Jewish character and very existence of the State of Israel."¹⁴⁵ To the extent that the Palestinian minority in Israel has the potential of developing into a fifth column within the state, they represent a serious weak spot in the state's defence system. The most recent cases of possible al-Qaida activity among Israeli-Palestinians may indicate a conscious desire on the part of al-Qaida and its affiliates to exploit that weak spot.

Al-Qaida's presence in the Palestinian territories may not be an unambiguous hitch for the stature of Hamas on the Arab and international scene. To the extent that Hamas appears as the major credible force capable of limiting and controlling the activities of salafi-jihadi groups, this position may represent a valuable political and diplomatic asset for Hamas. Several reports have suggested cooperation between Egyptian intelligence and Hamas against al-Qaida affiliates in the Sinai. Hamas did, reportedly, extradite a wanted al-Qaida leader hiding in Gaza, who was suspected of being involved in attacks on tourists in Egypt. According to the Palestinian news agency Ma'an, the al-Qaida leader was handed over to Egypt as part of a deal to allow dozens of Hamas political and military leaders who were stranded in the Sinai to return to Gaza through the sealed Rafah border crossing.¹⁴⁶ Although there has long been a tense relationship between Egypt and Hamas, the former seems to have come to terms with the fact that Hamas has consolidated its grip on the Gaza Strip and Egypt has applied a pragmatic attitude towards dealing with Hamas as the real authority in the territory.¹⁴⁷

11 Conclusion

Al-Qaida is actively trying to influence the political discourse in the Palestinian arena. Through frequent public appearances, al-Qaida leaders are making their voices heard among the Palestinian public. Since Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, Hamas has

¹⁴⁵ "GSS: Israeli-Arabs are Existential Danger to Israel", *Israel National News*, 13 March 2007, <http://israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/121829> (accessed October 2008).

¹⁴⁶ "85 allowed through Rafah crossing due to secret deal between Hamas and Egypt", *Ma'an News*, 1 October 2007, <http://www.maannews.net/en/index.php?opr=ShowDetails&ID=25628> (accessed September 2008).

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Spyer, "Analysis: Increasingly, Hamas is gaining acceptance in the Arab world", *Jerusalem Post*, 3 September 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1220444321286> (accessed October 2008).

become a main target for their criticism against any sign of moderation on the part of Hamas. In operational terms, al-Qaida has increased its focus on Israel since 2002, instigating a number of attacks against Israel and against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad. Within the Palestinian territories, especially in the Gaza Strip, there have emerged a number of individuals and fringe groups expressing sympathies with al-Qaida's salafi-jihadi ideology. These fringe groups have organised violent activities inspired by al-Qaida's style of combat, including attacks against what is considered 'non-Islamic' activities, assaults on Christians, and the kidnapping of foreigners. This type of violence is a new phenomenon in the Palestinian territories and indicates a widening of the range of methods being used in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, the available sources do not present hard evidence for the existence of a genuine al-Qaida organisation in the Palestinian territories. Nevertheless, given the growing number of groups claiming to adhere to salafi-jihadi dogmas being active within a political context of constant duress, the scenario of having al-Qaida materialising in the form of a solid organisation within the Palestinian territories would not be surprising.

A significant part of the Palestinian public is, according to opinion polls, receptive to the ideology and anti-Western sentiments of al-Qaida. The dominant Islamist faction on the Palestinian scene, Hamas, acknowledges to some degree that al-Qaida represents a challenge, warning that, although al-Qaida is not perceived as a significant force among the Palestinians today, the salafi-jihadi trend has a potential for growth in the near future. Hamas leaders refer to the Western policy of isolation and boycott of the Hamas government as the driving force behind the rise of salafi-jihadi sentiments within the Palestinian territories. The political upheavals and economic distress that the people in Gaza have undergone recently have created a fertile environment for extremism. Some Hamas leaders suggest that this situation may influence Hamas in turning towards more extremist policies and that such a development is a more serious threat than the possible formation of al-Qaida groups in Gaza.

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