



PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Quick Facts

Population: *West Bank*: 2,747,943, *Gaza Strip*: 1,795,183

Area: *West Bank*: 5,860 sq km *Gaza Strip*: 360 sq km

Ethnic Groups: *West Bank*: Palestinian Arab and others 83%, Jewish 17% *Gaza Strip*: Palestinian Arab

Religions: *West Bank*: Muslim 80-85% (predominately Sunni), Jewish 12-14%, Christian 1-2.5% (mainly Greek Orthodox), other, unaffiliated, unspecified <1% *Gaza Strip*: Muslim (predominately Sunni) 98-99%, Christian <1%, other, unaffiliated, unspecified <1%

Government Type: PLO/Fatah (contested)

GDP (official exchange rate): *West Bank*: \$9.828 billion, *Gaza Strip*: \$2.938 billion

Map and Quick Facts derived in part from the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2018)

INTRODUCTION

The Palestinian National Authority (PA or PNA) was created in accordance with the 1993 Oslo Accords. Under the subsequent “Oslo Process,” the PA assumed the responsibilities of Israeli military administration in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (“Area A”), and was expected to expand that territory through final status negotiations. The PA includes a Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), a legislative body with 132 seats elected from Gaza and the West Bank. As a result of the last Palestinian legislative elections, held in 2006, Hamas became the largest faction in the PLC, with 72 seats. However, the rival Fatah faction, backed by Western governments concerned about Hamas’ continued militancy, undermined the rule of subsequent Hamas-dominated governments. After more than a year of tension, Hamas forcibly seized control of Gaza in 2007. The two territories remained under separate rule for seven years. In June 2014, Hamas and Fatah forged an interim unity government, with the aim of holding elections to formally reunify. But soon thereafter, conflict between Gaza and Israel erupted. It became clear that Hamas remained in full control of the territory, and commanded a formidable rocket arsenal that had the capacity to reach deep into Israeli territory. A follow-up reconciliation agreement in October 2017 also failed to end the division, with Hamas unwilling to relinquish its weapons and the PA/Fatah unwilling to reassume civil control over Gaza. Hamas remains the true power broker in Gaza, while Fatah maintains an iron grip on the West Bank. Moreover, Hamas remains the most influential Islamist movement in the Gaza Strip, but other Islamist groups have also gained support from the Palestinian public.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Hamas

“Hamas” means “zeal” in Arabic, and is an Arabic acronym for Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-

'Islāmiyyah (the Islamic Resistance Movement). The group is primarily concentrated in the Gaza Strip, but does have support in pockets of the West Bank. The group was founded as a splinter group of the Muslim Brotherhood in December 1987, during the early days of the intifada (uprising) against Israel. The Brotherhood refused to engage in violence against Israel, but Hamas' founders believed that it was a duty to engage in "resistance." According to one insider's account, the secretive organization's founders included Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, Hassan Yousef, Ayman Abu Taha, Jamil Hamami, Mahmud Muslih, Muhammed Jamal al-Natsah, and Jamal Mansour.¹

In addition to its immediate goal of destroying the State of Israel, Hamas' 1988 mithaq (founding charter) illustrates the organization's commitment to universal Islamist principles. This is demonstrated by its slogan: "Allah is its goal [theocratic rule], the Prophet is its model [importance of the Sunna], the Qur'an its Constitution [sharia], Jihad [violence] is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes."² While most Hamas members are Palestinian Sunni Arabs, the charter welcomes all Muslims who: "embraces its faith, ideology, follows its program, keeps its secrets, and wants to belong to its ranks and carry out the duty."³

The Hamas charter also conveys the conviction that Palestine is waqf, or land endowed to Muslims by Allah because it was "conquered by the companions of the Prophet."⁴ Hamas also clearly defines nationalism as "part of the religious creed,"⁵ thereby universalizing the notion of "nationalism" to include the entire Muslim umma (community).⁶

To achieve its immediate goal of an Islamic Palestinian state, Hamas has steadfastly denounced the 1993 Oslo Accords, the 2007 Annapolis conference, and all other diplomatic efforts to establish a lasting peace in the region as a "contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement."⁷ However, when addressing Western audiences, Hamas leaders such as Gaza-based Ismail Haniyeh and politburo chief Khaled Meshal have stated that they are willing to recognize Israel along pre-1967 borders.⁸ Yet, other senior Hamas officials, such as Mahmoud al Zahar, bluntly state that there are no leaders within Hamas willing to acknowledge the pre-1967 borders or live at peace with Israel.⁹

Hamas gained the support of a significant portion of the Palestinian people by providing social and welfare services and by presenting itself as Israel's implacable foe, as well as a pious opponent of the more corrupt and ossified Fatah faction, whose officials also comprise most of the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the PA. Indeed, Hamas candidates ran under the name "Change and Reform List" in the 2006 legislative elections.¹⁰ Since its violent takeover of Gaza in 2007, Hamas has taken steps to Islamize the society. However, there are indications that this may have only served to undermine the movement's authority.¹¹ Additionally, press reports indicate that Hamas has been losing popularity as a result of its inability to deal with Gaza's festering economic and social problems, among other issues.¹²

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States made efforts to cut the flow of cash to countless terror groups, including Hamas. Funds from Saudi Arabia, long identified as a top sponsor of Hamas, slowed following the Kingdom's decision to cut back on funding *jihadi* groups in 2004, after suffering attacks by a local al-Qaeda affiliate.¹³ However, Iran, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, filled the void.

Iran soon became Hamas' primary state sponsor, with hundreds of millions of dollars pledged and delivered.¹⁴ Iranian largesse was an important source of income for Hamas, and that revenue stream was significantly and adversely impacted over time as U.S.-led sanctions sapped the Islamic Republic's cash reserves. Thereafter, Tehran cut most, if not all, financial assistance when tension arose between it and Hamas over attitudes toward the Assad regime in Syria. The Iranians strongly supported the embattled Syrian leader, even as he slaughtered Sunnis and Palestinians in the country's ongoing civil war. Hamas, however, did not. As a result, it vacated its headquarters in Damascus, where it had been based, and reportedly turned to new patrons, including Qatar and Turkey.¹⁵ Recent press reports indicate that,

following the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood regionally in 2013, Hamas and Iran may now be seeking to restore their ties.¹⁶

Hamas augments its funds from state sponsors with donations from private charities (the most notorious being the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation, now defunct, which channeled \$12 million to the organization before it was proscribed¹⁷), as well as deep-pocketed donors around the world. For more than a decade Hamas also extracted significant tax revenues from the subterranean tunnels connecting the Gaza Strip to the Sinai Peninsula, through which a great many products, including weapons, flowed. However, since the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated government of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, Egyptian authorities have shut down hundreds of smuggling tunnels along the Egypt-Gaza border. According to officials in Gaza, the closure of these tunnels is currently causing the Gaza economy to suffer monthly losses of approximately \$230 million.¹⁸ More recently, further taxation on wider swathes of Gazan economic life was instituted in order to address the shortfall in funding.¹⁹

Hamas, along with other like-minded violent factions, has fired more than 15,000 rockets and mortars into Israel since 2001.²⁰ The group draws a distinction between its political activities and its paramilitary attacks. However, this is a false distinction, as all of the movement's component parts contribute to "resistance" activities.²¹ According to Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, "We cannot separate the wing from the body. If we do so, the body will not be able to fly."²² Since 1993, the military wing of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, is believed to have killed over five hundred people in more than 350 separate terrorist attacks, many of them suicide bombings.²³

Although attacks against Israel from Gaza slowed in 2013, Israeli authorities foiled numerous Hamas terror plots in the West Bank.²⁴ Israeli officials identified Gaza-based Hamas official Fathi Hamad²⁵ as well as Turkey-based Hamas leader Saleh al-Aruri²⁶ as key catalysts for many of these plots.²⁷ Meanwhile, the rocket war of July-August 2014 revealed that Hamas maintains a significant arsenal, primarily via Iran, which gives the faction the ability to fire deep into Israeli territory.

After the 2014 war, Hamas continued to build tunnels into Israel and attempt to replenish its rocket supply.²⁸ Hamas regularly uses items meant for humanitarian aid to construct rockets.²⁹ The group has also carried out attacks across the West Bank, such as the fatal shooting of an Israeli couple in October of 2015.³⁰ The group has also planned attacks against Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, one of which was foiled by Shin Bet, the Israeli domestic intelligence service.³¹ Meanwhile, Hamas' cooperation with the ISIS affiliate group in Sinai, originally known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, escalated tensions with the Egyptian government.³² Hamas had regularly trained and treated Islamic State fighters before sending them back into the Sinai Peninsula.³³ Since 2017, however, these Hamas-ISIS ties have reportedly been eroded at the request of the Egyptian government, amid Hamas efforts to repair relations with Cairo.³⁴

Hamas has also tried to rally public support for a third intifada, or uprising, in the West Bank. Since the start of the wave of terror that hit Israel from late-2015 into mid-2016, Hamas has either celebrated terrorists killed in attacks against Israelis or claimed attackers as members of the group. After three Israeli soldiers were wounded in an attack in February 2016, Hamas held a rally in Gaza.³⁵ A similar rally was held in April 2016 after a member of Hamas blew up a bus in Jerusalem. That attack wounded 21 Israelis.³⁶ In September 2016, the international NGO World Vision halted funding to Gaza projects after Israel alleged one of its employees, Mohammad el-Halabi, was funneling the foreign funds to Hamas.³⁷ In December 2016, the Israeli Shin Bet uncovered a 20-member Hamas cell in the West Bank that was plotting suicide bombings in major Israeli cities.³⁸

With economic, humanitarian, and social conditions continuing to deteriorate in Gaza, Hamas began supporting protest marches on the border with Israel in March 2018.³⁹ The goal of the marches was nominally the "right of return" for Palestinians who had been evicted or fled from their lands in 1948, although Hamas' real goal was to increase international attention on Gaza's plight in order to end the Israeli and Egyptian blockade.⁴⁰ As of July 2018, after months of weekly demonstrations and over 100

dead due to Israeli fire (including many reported militants), Hamas has still not met this objective. Reports indicate that a long-term truce with Israel may be a possibility, as is another round of direct conflict if conditions in the territory do not improve.⁴¹

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

Harakat al-Jihād al-Islāmi fi Filastīn (Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or PIJ) was founded sometime between 1979 and 1981 by several Muslim Brotherhood members who, like Hamas, felt that the Brotherhood was too moderate and not fully committed to the principle of jihad and the establishment of a Palestinian state governed according to sharia. In addition, the founding members were also inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.⁴² Founders Fathi Shikaki and Abd al-Aziz Awda forged an organization whose ultimate aim was to destroy Israel through jihad. Unlike Hamas, which is amenable to a hudna (tactical truce) with Israel, PIJ explicitly rejects any and all forms of recognition of the Jewish State.⁴³

The exact size of PIJ, a highly secretive organization, is unknown. Most estimates suggest that membership ranges from a few hundred to a few thousand.⁴⁴ The ethnic make-up of the group is overwhelmingly Palestinian Sunni, though there have been reports of increasing Shi'ite presence, a direct result of Iranian support.⁴⁵

While PIJ was known for its suicide bombing attacks during the Second Intifada (2000-2005), in recent years the group has primarily focused on rocket and sniper attacks, as well as the construction of cross-border attack tunnels, from the Gaza Strip. The IDF has tried to thin PIJ's ranks through targeted killings and arrests in recent years. The effectiveness of these actions is as yet unclear.

In January 2014, the U.S. State Department designated Ziyad al Nakhalah, the Deputy Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT).⁴⁶ Other leaders of the group have yet to be designated. Like Hamas, PIJ's activity against Israel from Gaza declined in 2013. However, it continued to plot and carry out attacks from the West Bank.⁴⁷ It subsequently played a significant role in the rocket war of July 2014, firing Iranian-made or Iranian-furnished rockets deep into Israeli territory.

PIJ has also been a strong supporter of the wave of violence (known as the “knife intifada” by some) which swept across Israel in late-2015 and into mid-2016. In November 2015, PIJ and Hamas announced “new methods of resistance” against Israel.⁴⁸ In May of 2016 it was revealed that Iran would renew its financial support to PIJ after nearly two years.⁴⁹ In Tehran, PIJ leader Ramadan Shallah praised Iran for its support of the “Palestinian intifada.”⁵⁰ When municipal elections were initially announced in the West Bank and Gaza in August 2016, PIJ boycotted the elections and instead urged Palestinians to escalate the violence, to minimal effect.⁵¹

PIJ has played an integral role in the Gaza marches on the Israel border, begun in March 2018, with several of its members reported killed by Israeli fire during the two months of unrest.⁵² More recently, in late May 2018, PIJ was held responsible for starting a major escalation in rocket and mortar fire from Gaza into southern Israel—a sign, according to some, of a renewed Iranian influence on Palestinian politics.⁵³

Popular Resistance Committees

The Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) is made up of “former armed activists of different factions,”⁵⁴ and is likely the third largest violent group in the Palestinian territories, after Hamas and PIJ. According to the IDF, the PRC often “acts as a sub-contractor” for Iran, and is heavily influenced by Hezbollah.⁵⁵

Since its founding in 2000, through its military wing known as the Al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades, the PRC has taken responsibility for a number of terror attacks against Israel,⁵⁶ and an attack on U.S. personnel in Gaza in 2003.⁵⁷ Some of the group's operations have been conducted jointly with Hamas.⁵⁸ It has also reportedly worked with Salafi jihadist groups operating in the Sinai Peninsula abutting Gaza.⁵⁹

In February 2014, the Israeli Air Force targeted a PRC operative who was known to work with the

Sinai-based jihadist group Ansar Bayt al Maqdis.⁶⁰ In recent years, the group has become increasingly Salafi in outlook, as conveyed through Sunni *jihadist* forums online.⁶¹ In 2006, Israeli officials warned that the PRC's leadership was in contact with "Global Jihad sources in North Africa and the Sinai."⁶²

In light of Hamas' attempts to prevent unauthorized rocket attacks against Israel, the group has at times found itself at odds with Hamas. In July 2013, for example, the PRC issued a communiqué that demanded that Hamas stop its arrest of the mujahideen in the Gaza Strip.⁶³ The PRC maintained a low profile during the 2014 rocket war, although its personnel are still active when trying to provoke Israeli retribution against Hamas. Israel holds Hamas responsible for militant activity emanating from Gaza. An improvised explosive device (IED) detonated on the Israel-Gaza border in February 2018 against Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel was deemed to be a PRC operation.⁶⁴

Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades

The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades is the military wing of the secular Fatah faction,⁶⁵ which has adopted Islamist symbols and slogans that stand in stark contrast to those of the secular Fatah faction. The group was formally designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States in March 2002, largely for its actions inside Israel and the West Bank, where it carried out suicide bombings and small arms attacks against Israel during the second Intifada.⁶⁶

Over the past few years, however, the group has largely remained dormant. The group has primarily operated out of the Gaza Strip, with a handful of operations in the West Bank.⁶⁷ According to the U.S. Department of State, "Iran has exploited al-Aqsa's lack of resources and formal leadership by providing funds and guidance, mostly through Hezbollah facilitators."⁶⁸

The primary acts of violence carried out by the group in recent years have been rocket attacks from Gaza into southern Israel.⁶⁹ Press reports, however, have suggested that the group may seek a comeback in the West Bank.⁷⁰

Indeed, in March 2016, thirteen Palestinians were injured in firefights between the Palestinian Authority and members of the Aqsa Martyrs in Nablus.⁷¹ As clashes heated up again in Nablus in August 2016, the PA arrested a local leader of the Brigades, Ahmed Izz Halawa, and beat him to death.⁷² Halawa's death sparked mass protests in the West Bank.⁷³ Concern on the part of the PA was that the group's members, still heavily armed and now operating more as criminal enterprises, were being coopted by exiled Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan.⁷⁴ Gunfights between PA security forces and local gangs erupt sporadically in the wake of PA arrest operations into Nablus' Balata refugee camp, as was the case in February 2018.⁷⁵

Jaysh al-Islam (JI)

Jaysh al-Islam (JI), or "Army of Islam," is closely linked to the Dughmush clan of Gaza, and is believed to have several hundred members.⁷⁶ The Salafi group was founded in 2005, and similar to other Palestinian Islamist splinter groups, it has global jihadist objectives and is believed to have ties to al-Qaeda.⁷⁷

The group's most notable action was the March 2007 kidnapping of BBC journalist Alan Johnston in order to negotiate the release of al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist militant Abu Qatada, who was then jailed in the United Kingdom.⁷⁸ The Johnston kidnapping, as well as an attack that killed five senior Hamas officials, led to a clash with Hamas in August 2008 that is said to have weakened the group significantly.⁷⁹

The group's affinity for al-Qaeda has been widely documented. Days after the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, the group released a eulogy for the fallen al-Qaeda leader.⁸⁰ In May 2011, the group was designated as a terrorist group by the U.S. Department of State. The accompanying press release noted that the group "worked with Hamas and is attempting to develop closer al Qaeda contacts."⁸¹ In 2006, the group sent a letter to senior al-Qaeda leaders, asking whether it was permissible to accept money from other groups in Gaza that did not share their ideology, specifically nationalists or Iranian-backed factions.⁸² Israeli officials also noted in 2006, "alleged efforts by Mumtaz Dughmush to make contact with Global Jihad sources, possibly to include those responsible for the bombing of the USS Cole."⁸³

During Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012, the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, a consolidation of Salafi jihadist groups in Gaza, and JI conducted joint rocket attacks against Israel.⁸⁴ According to Israeli officials, JI operated training camps in Gaza for jihadists who subsequently went to fight in Yemen, Syria, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, among other locations.⁸⁵ Hamas allowed these camps to operate in Gaza.⁸⁶ In more recent years, Hamas has launched a crackdown on Salafist groups operating from Gaza, including most likely JI, in a bid to rehabilitate its relationship with the Egyptian government and curb rocket fire against Israel.⁸⁷

Jaysh al-Ummah (JU)

Ideologically affiliated with al-Qaeda, Jaysh al-Ummah (JU), or the "Army of the Nation," believes that "the sons of Zion are occupiers and they must be uprooted completely... We will fight them as we are ordered by God and the Prophet Mohammad."⁸⁸ The Salafi jihadist group was formed in either 2006⁸⁹ or 2007,⁹⁰ and is led by Abu Hafs al-Maqdisi. While the group's membership number is kept secret, it lacks the capability to strike targets outside of Gaza, suggesting it is small in size.⁹¹

JU has been very critical of Hamas since its inception. Most notably, it has criticized Hamas for arresting its members as they were attempting to carry out terrorist operations.⁹² Hamas does appear to allow the group to conduct *dawa*-related activity in the Gaza Strip, however.⁹³

JU has warned against the increasing influence of Iran and its proxy Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip. While the group has denied an operational connection to al-Qaeda, it has a similar ideological outlook.⁹⁴ We are "connected to our brothers in Al Qaeda by our beliefs, we and they are following the great Prophet. Osama bin Laden is our brother and we appreciate him very much," a JU official stated.⁹⁵

Since 2013, the group has issued a number of statements and videos that belie its Salafi beliefs. In January 2013, the jihadist group issued a video urging "all the mujahideen all over Earth to target Iranian interests everywhere."⁹⁶ In a separate message released in January 2013, JU called for greater support for jihadists in Mali: "[W]e will support and be loyal and aid our mujahideen monotheist brothers in Mali without limits."⁹⁷ In August 2013, Abu Hafs al Maqdisi, JU's leader, called on Egyptians to wage jihad against Egyptian army chief General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.⁹⁸ And, in November 2013, the group issued a eulogy for Hakeemullah Mehsud, the former emir of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan.⁹⁹ JU is believed to have fought alongside other militant factions against Israel during the 2014 Gaza War.¹⁰⁰ As of June 2018, JU was still launching fundraising appeals to supporters on various social media platforms.¹⁰¹

Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT)

The Palestinian "Party of Liberation" is a local affiliate of the larger HuT movement, which has a presence in some 45 countries. The group's immediate aim is to establish a caliphate and implement sharia throughout the Muslim world.¹⁰²

Despite HuT's well-documented enmity toward Israel, the group does not directly engage in terrorism, nor do its branches maintain an armed wing. Rather, HuT seeks to "agitate and educate."¹⁰³ While no reliable figures can be found regarding HuT's membership in the Palestinian Territories, it is widely considered to be small, despite its organic base of support.

To voice opposition to the PLO's participation in the 2007 Annapolis peace summit, HuT organized a demonstration with over 2,500 attendees in Hebron, culminating in the killing of one protestor by PA police.¹⁰⁴ Soon after, over 10,000 HuT supporters gathered in Al-Bireh under the slogan: "the caliphate is the rising force."¹⁰⁵ In July 2010, PA security forces arrested thousands of HuT supporters at a rally in Ramallah, which was banned by the PA.¹⁰⁶

In 2011, PA forces disrupted one of the group's rallies in the West Bank.¹⁰⁷ This was followed by reports of a campaign of arrests of HuT members by the Palestinian Authority.¹⁰⁸ In August 2011, the group slammed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, when he suggested that NATO may have a presence in a future Palestinian state.¹⁰⁹

Despite intermittent crackdowns by Palestinian security forces in the West Bank, the Islamist movement has continued to hold events there.¹¹⁰ Most recently, in February 2014, HuT accused Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank of arresting its members for criticizing President Abbas.¹¹¹ The group had a significant presence (flags, mainly) during the unrest in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Shuafat, following the murder of a Palestinian teenager by Israeli extremists.

Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSC)

The MSC, a Salafi *jihadi* group, was formed in the Gaza Strip in 2012. The group is a consolidation of Ansar al Sunnah and the Tawhid and Jihad Group in Jerusalem.¹¹² In November 2012, one of the group's leaders stated that the MSC aims to "fight the Jews for the return of Islam's rule, not only in Palestine, but throughout the world."¹¹³

While the exact size of the group is unknown, it has taken responsibility for a number of rocket attacks against Israel,¹¹⁴ some of which have been carried out with Jaysh al Islam.¹¹⁵ In addition, MSC took responsibility for a June 2012 bombing and shooting attack that killed one Israeli civilian.¹¹⁶ According to a video released by the MSC, the June attack was "a gift to our brothers in Qaeda al Jihad [al-Qaeda] and Sheikh [Ayman al-] Zawahiri" and a retaliation for the killing of former al-Qaeda emir Osama bin Laden.¹¹⁷

Several Israeli air strikes targeted MSC operatives in 2012. After those attacks, jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and leaders like al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri posted eulogies online.

The MSC was one of several Salafi jihadi groups that took part in the November 2012 conflict with Israel. Following the ceasefire, the group said that "[W]e truly are not a party to the signing of this truce between the Palestinian factions and the Jews."¹¹⁸ Throughout 2013, the MSC, through the Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center, its media wing, promoted the jihad in Syria as well as the efforts of the Sinai-based jihadist group Ansar Bayt al Maqdis.¹¹⁹ In November 2013, three MSC operatives were reported killed by Israeli security forces in Yatta, near Hebron in the southern West Bank, ahead of planned terrorist attacks by the cell.¹²⁰

Harakat as-Sabirin Nasran li-Filastin

Harakat as-Sabirin Nasran li-Filastin (as-Sabirin), or "The Movement of the Patient Ones for the Liberation of Palestine" is a new, Iran-sponsored terror group in Gaza.¹²¹ Founded in early 2014, the group burst onto the scene when one of its fighters, Nizar Saeed Issa, died in a mysterious explosion in the Gaza refugee camp of Jabalya.¹²² Since then, As-Sabirin has lost two fighters, Ahmad Sharif as-Sarhi and Mus'ab al-Khayr al-Sakafi, in apparent clashes with Israel.

As-Sabirin is Shia group in a predominantly Sunni territory. Its flag and logo are derived from those of Hezbollah, and its fighters are pulled from another Iranian proxy: Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Its charter states that "jihad is the way of Allah to open doors to paradise... and in particular our journey faces the might enemies of the racist Zionist body and on its head America the great Satan."¹²³

As-Sabirin is headed by Hisham Salem. Formerly a commander in PIJ, Salem hails from a prominent family in the Beit Lahia neighborhood in Gaza.¹²⁴ Salem was jailed in 1996 by the Palestinian Authority for organizing suicide attacks in Israel and during the second intifada was placed on Israel's most wanted terrorist list.¹²⁵ He has run several charities in the Gaza Strip, one of which, al-Baqiyat al-Salihah, was shut down by Hamas for spreading Shi'ism.¹²⁶

The Iranian proxy group receives approximately \$10 million per year from Tehran, which is typically smuggled through tunnels into Gaza.¹²⁷ Local reports suggest fighters in the group receive a salary of 250 to 300 U.S. dollars per month, while senior officials make up to 700 dollars a month.¹²⁸

In February 2016, the Palestinian Authority broke up an as-Sabirin cell in Bethlehem.¹²⁹ According to PA security officials, the group was attempting to convert families in the West Bank to Shiism.¹³⁰

That same month, Salem's home in Gaza was targeted in a bombing attack; no injuries were reported. In January 2018, the U.S. State Department announced that as-Sabirin was now a "Specially-Designated Global Terrorist Group."¹³¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Evidence suggests that Hamas was, in the past, more popular among Palestinians than its secular rival, Fatah. This was true even before Hamas' unexpected victory in the PA's 2006 legislative election, and this trend continued after the organization's abrupt seizure of power in Gaza in June 2007.

Some analysts contend that such support is attributable more to a rejection of Fatah's alleged corruption than sincere support for Hamas' Islamism and militancy.¹³² However, it may also be tied to the lack of popular support for the PLO's peace negotiations with Israel. A 2013 poll from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that more than 54 percent of Palestinians in Gaza oppose the idea of a two-state-solution.¹³³ Furthermore, data collected the same year by the Pew Research Center found that 62 percent of Muslims in the Palestinian Territories believe suicide bombings can be often or sometimes justified.¹³⁴ However, since Hamas' takeover of Gaza in 2007, anecdotal evidence suggests that the daily challenges of governance have eroded some of the popular support Hamas garnered through its resistance of Israel.¹³⁵ In other words, it is hard to maintain popular support as a revolutionary movement when saddled with mundane problems. As one senior Hamas leader in the West Bank acknowledged in 2014, "the sovereign loses."¹³⁶

Under both Hamas rule in Gaza and PLO rule in the West Bank, evidence suggests that Christian minorities in both territories suffer discrimination and persecution, including religiously-motivated attacks on churches, destruction of crosses and altars, and the kidnapping and forced conversion of Christian girls.¹³⁷ Admittedly, Christians live with significantly more freedom in the West Bank—and are publicly acknowledged by the PA government—especially relative to Gaza since Hamas took control, where Christians reportedly "feel increasingly unwelcome."¹³⁸

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE:

The active role of violent Islamist groups in the West Bank has dropped precipitously since the 2007 Palestinian civil war. Fearing a Hamas takeover in the West Bank, the United States and other Western states have been furnishing the Palestinian Authority government in the West Bank with military training, weaponry, financing, and intelligence in order to more efficiently battle Hamas and other factions. Moreover, close security coordination between the PA and Israel has remained intact in the battle against what they perceive to be their common Islamist enemies. This approach has undoubtedly been a success, with the West Bank over the past decade relatively stable compared to preceding years.¹³⁹

With Hamas entrenched in Gaza, it appears unlikely that Israel will be able to neutralize the group with stand-off military power alone. This was made clear again during the 2014 conflict; even as Israel pounded hundreds of Hamas targets, long-range rockets continued to strike deep into Israeli territory. This has prompted some to propose that Israel should enter into negotiations with its long-time foe. Others contend that since Hamas is at one of its weakest points, both economically and politically, since its founding, now may be the time to cripple the group. Yet, the question of who would control Gaza after Hamas has prompted the Israelis to tread carefully. The threat of a bloody ground campaign to reoccupy the territory, in addition to potential anarchy afterwards, has counseled for a policy of restraint, at least so far.¹⁴⁰

ENDNOTES

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