

American Foreign Policy Council

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

QUICK FACTS

Population: West Bank: 2,514,845
Gaza Strip: 1,604,238

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

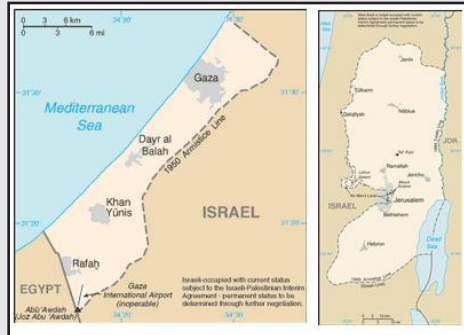
Ethnic Groups: West Bank:
Palestinian Arab and others
83%, Jewish 17% Gaza Strip:
Palestinian Arab

Religions: West Bank: Muslim 75%
(predominately Sunni), Jewish 17%, Christian and other 8% Gaza Strip: Muslim
(predominately Sunni) 99.3%, Christian 0.7%

Government Type: PLO/Fatah (contested)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$6.641 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



Islamism in the Palestinian Authority is in many ways analogous to global Islamism, boasting the same broad totalitarian ideology, strategies, tactics, and ultimate goals. There is, however, one major exception: while the enemy of the latter is more general (the “infidel” West, apostate regimes, etc.), Islamism in the Palestinian Authority is primarily dedicated to the annihilation of the State of Israel.

The various Islamist groups within the Palestinian Authority have their counterparts among other international Islamist forces. Hamas has its roots in, and is akin to, the international Muslim Brotherhood, particularly with regard to its approach to propa-

ganda and indoctrination. Organizations such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which have deemed Hamas not to be violent enough, find their counterparts in other radical splinters of the Brotherhood, such as Ayman Zawahiri's Egyptian Jihad. Other ultra-violent jihadist organizations operating out of PA territory—among them Jund Ansar Allah, Jaysh al-Umma, and Jaysh al-Islam—are identical to al-Qaeda in outlook and strategy, and even claim affiliation. Even secular Fatah and its military wing exhibits Islamist elements not unlike those found among various moderate Muslim organizations in the West.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Palestinian National Authority (PA or PNA) was created by the Palestine Liberation Organization as a five-year interim body in accordance with the 1994 Gaza-Jericho agreement that followed the Oslo Accords. Under the Oslo process, the PA is to assume the responsibilities of Israeli military administration in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (“Area A”) until final status negotiations. The PA includes a Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), a legislative body with 132 seats elected from Gaza and the West Bank. Since 2006, Hamas has been the largest faction in the PLC, with 72 seats; following its 2007 clash with rival Fatah, Hamas has also seized control of all PA facilities in the Gaza Strip. Within the jurisdiction of the PA, Hamas is the most influential Islamist movement, followed by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and lesser known ultra-radical *jihadist* organizations.

Hamas

“Hamas” means “zeal” in Arabic and is an Arabic acronym for *harakat al-muqawamah al-islamiyyah* (the Islamic Resistance Movement). The group is primarily concentrated in the Gaza Strip, with support in various sections of the West Bank. In addition to Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and his father Hassan Yousef, Hamas scion-turned-defector Mosab Hassan Yousef also identifies Ayman Abu Taha, Jamil Hamami, Mahmud Muslih, Muhammed Jamal al-Natsah, and Jamal Mansour as founders of the organization,¹ which was created in 1987 as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood with the aim of replacing the entire state of Israel with a Muslim state gov-

erned according to *sharia* law. *Jihad* and Islamist indoctrination are its two principal means of instituting this new state.

The U.S. State Department has estimated that Hamas has “tens of thousands of supporters and sympathizers,”² as well as many devoted members. Precise numbers are unknown, but more than 200,000 Palestinians—5.26 percent of the total population of the Palestinian Territories—attended the funeral procession for Sheikh Ahmed Yassin upon his death in 2004.³

In addition to its immediate goals, Hamas’ founding charter also illustrates the organization’s commitment to more universal Islamist principles. The slogan—“Allah is its goal [theocratic rule], the Prophet its model [importance of the Sunna], the Qur’an its Constitution [sharia], *Jihad* [terrorism] its path, and death [suicide-bombings] for the cause of Allah its most sublime belief”⁴—fully demonstrates the group’s universal Islamist convictions. Though most Hamas members are Palestinian Sunni Arabs, the charter “welcomes all Muslims who share its beliefs and thinking, commit themselves to its course of action, keep its secrets and aspire to join its ranks in order to carry out their duty.”⁵

The Hamas Charter echoes the sentiment of all Islamists in regard to the land of Palestine, all of which is believed to be “*waqf* land” that has belonged to Islam “since it was conquered by the Companion of the Prophet [c. 640].”⁶ In accordance with Islamic law, Islamists stress that the land of Palestine belongs to Islam and must therefore be re-conquered by Islam, not specifically by the Palestinian people. Hamas clearly defines “Nationalism as part and parcel of the religious faith,”⁷ thereby universalizing the notion of “nationalism” to include the entire Muslim *umma*, irrespective of actual “nationality.” And like global *jihadists*, Hamas clerics have publicly expressed their support for re-establishing the Caliphate.⁸

To achieve its immediate goal of an Islamic Palestinian state, Hamas has steadfastly denounced the Oslo Accords, the Annapolis conference, and other diplomatic efforts to establish a lasting peace in the region as “contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement.”⁹ However, when addressing Western audiences, Hamas leaders such as Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Meshal have stated that they are willing to recognize Israel along pre-1967 borders¹⁰, even as the organization continues to reiterate, on a regular

basis, its total rejection of Israel's existence.¹¹ Such doublespeak is a common Islamist tactic that finds its roots in Islam's doctrine of deception, known as *taqiyya*, which the various PA factions even implement against one another.¹²

In the style of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas has gained the support of the Palestinian people by providing social and welfare services and by presenting itself as Israel's implacable foe, as well as an opponent of the more corrupt, effete Fatah. Hamas is also steadily Islamicizing Palestinian society through indoctrination and propaganda. This method is a fundamental part of the organization's charter: "We must imprint on the minds of generations of Muslims that the Palestinian problem is a religious one," an "Islamic education based on the implementation of religious precepts [*sharia*]."¹³ Hamas has gone to extreme lengths to indoctrinate young Palestinians into its beliefs, including the use of "jihadi" Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny lookalikes in its television programs.¹⁴

The organization's principal sources of funding traditionally include Iran (which, by 1995, had provided the organization more than \$100 million¹⁵ and in the latter half of 2008 pledged \$150 million¹⁶); private charities, including those operating in the West (the most notorious being the Holy Land Foundation, now defunct, which channeled \$12 million to Hamas¹⁷); and individual donors from the Gulf States.¹⁸ In spite of funding from sympathizers, however, Hamas has suffered economic setbacks since attaining power. Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel has led to Western suspension of aid for Gaza development, hindering the organization's ability to govern.

Since 1993, the military wing of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din Qassam Brigades, is believed to have killed over five hundred people in more than 350 separate terrorist attacks, many of them suicide bombings.¹⁹ As recently as July 30, 2010, Hamas continues to launch rocket attacks against towns in southern Israel²⁰ and is suspected of attempting to smuggle weapons from Egypt into Gaza.²¹

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (literally, "the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine," i.e., *Harakat al-Jihād al-Islāmi fi Filastīn*) was founded sometime between 1979 and 1981²² by several Muslim Brother-

hood members who 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* law.²³ In addition, the founding members were also inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.²⁴ Founders Fathi Shikaki and Abd al-Aziz Awda were schooled in Egypt, and—consistent with the teachings of the most extreme Egyptian Islamists—forged an organization whose ultimate aim was to destroy Israel by violent *jihad*. Unlike Hamas, which has at least proposed a tactical truce with Israel, the PIJ explicitly rejects any and all forms of recognition of Israel.

PIJ is small and highly secretive, and accurate estimates of membership are difficult to find. However, the organization is believed to have hundreds of active members and to operate largely underground.²⁵ The ethnic make-up of the group is overwhelmingly Palestinian Arab. PIJ relies on suicide-bombing operations, and was responsible for the April 2006 suicide bombing in Tel Aviv that killed eleven people.²⁶ The Israeli army has thinned the PIJ's ranks considerably through killings and arrests in recent years, including the arrest of a high-ranking PIJ official in December 2008²⁷ and two raids on June 30, 2010 that eliminated five PIJ members.²⁸

According to the U.S. State Department, PIJ receives state sponsorship from Iran in the form of financial aid, and Syria provides a safe haven for PIJ by allowing it to maintain its headquarters in Damascus.²⁹ PIJ members (like former University of South Florida professor Sami al-Arian³⁰) have also been operating on American soil, funneling money to PIJ. And since PIJ, unlike Hamas, does not seek the support of the Palestinian population by providing social services or taking part in the electoral process, the aid thereby collected is used exclusively for violence, terrorism, and suicide bombings.³¹

Jund Ansar Allah (JAA)

Jund Ansar Allah, or “Soldiers of the Companions of God,” was first established in the Palestinian territory of Gaza in late 2008.³² Like other Palestinian Islamist groups, JAA asserts that it will “fight *jihad*” for the sake of God “until the banner of unity is hoisted” and Islam’s prophet Muhammad “is made victorious.”³³ Made up of disgruntled former Hamas and PIJ members, it seeks to unify the

Arab *mujahideen* under a new banner, and has criticized Hamas for insufficiently enforcing *sharia*.³⁴ JAA envisions implementing an Islamic emirate throughout the Middle East, and has declared “the soldiers of *tawhid* (unification) will not rest... until the entirety of Muslim lands are [sic] liberated and until our imprisoned Aqsa is purified from the desecration of the accursed Jews.”³⁵

Founded in the Gaza Strip city of Rafah, the group has spread rapidly throughout Gaza and claims to have some 500 members, most of them Palestinian Arabs, but including foreign fighters as well.³⁶ Hamas claims that the aim of JAA and other small Islamist groups is to “defame” Hamas. Furthermore, in an attempt to damage the reputation of JAA, which has often openly defied its authority in Gaza, Hamas has linked the organization with the notoriously corrupt Fatah, claiming that JAA has received weapons from former Fatah policemen and security officials in south Gaza.³⁷ Despite claims that JAA is linked to al-Qaeda, there is no direct evidence of such a connection, aside from a shared ideology.³⁸

JAA’s most brazen terrorist attempt involved ten of its members riding on horseback laden with explosives into the Karni border crossing, a passage point between Gaza and Israel that has been the site of considerable militant activity. Five JAA members were killed by Israeli troops as a result of the incident.³⁹ In August 2009, JAA clashed with Hamas forces, leading to the death of the group’s leader, Abdel-Latif Moussa. Hamas has accused the group of bombing several Internet cafés and a wedding party attended by relatives of Muhammad Dahlan, a Fatah leader in the West-Bank.⁴⁰

Jaysh Al-Islam (JI)

Jaysh al-Islam (JI), or “Army of Islam,” is closely linked to the Dughmush clan of Gaza, a former ally of Hamas, and is believed to have several hundred members.⁴¹ Similar to other Palestinian Islamist splinter groups, JI shares global *jihadi* objectives and is believed to be linked to al-Qaeda.⁴² 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, then incarcerated in the UK.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

Jaljalat

In Arabic, the word *jaljalat* signifies something momentous. The group which adopted that name consists of two factions: 1) dissidents from Hamas' Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, who deserted the movement following a ceasefire with Israel in 2008; and 2) Hamas renegades released from the organization's prisons.⁴⁵ Jaljalat is led by Mahmoud Taleb, also known as Abu Mutasem al-Madqisi, who was arrested by Hamas security forces in October 2009 for "violating national security."⁴⁶ The exact number of Jaljalat members is unknown, but one estimate places it at several thousand members.⁴⁷ Jaljalat has global *jihadist* aspirations and is allied with Jund Ansar Allah and other *jihadist* factions operating in the Palestinian Territories. It is openly critical of Hamas for being soft on Israel.⁴⁸ Like other Salafist groups in the PA, Jaljalat aims to establish an Islamic Emirate in Gaza.

The organization's most prominent attack was on June 27, 2009, against an Israeli Defense Forces detachment patrolling the Hoovers route, as a result of which one Israeli was killed and three were wounded.⁴⁹ In addition, the group has revealed its failed assassination plot against former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, two "infidels," in September 2009.⁵⁰

Jaysh Al-Ummah (JU)

Ideologically affiliated with al-Qaeda, Jaysh Al-Ummah (JU), or the "Army of the Nation," believes that "Muslims all over the world are obliged to fight the Israelis and the infidels until only Islam rules the earth."⁵¹ The group was formed in January 2008 and is led by Abu Hafs al-Maqdisi. While the group's membership number is kept secret, it has claimed that it does not have the capability to strike targets outside of Gaza, suggesting it is a small organization.⁵² JU, however, has been rather open in its criticism of Hamas since its inception. Most notably, it has criticized Hamas for arresting a JU field commander and other members as they were attempting to carry out terrorist operations.⁵³ At the same time, however, JU has said it would not try to escalate tensions with Hamas, but rather

urge it to release its members who are in prison, asking Hamas “Whose side are you on?”⁵⁴ Such a comment underlies the general unhappiness of JU with Hamas, which it holds responsible for the influx of Iranian influence in Gaza.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT)

A pan-Islamist group, the “Party of Liberation” is active in at least 45 countries, with a minor presence in the PA despite its refusal to take part in PLC elections. The group’s immediate aim is to establish a caliphate and implement *sharia* extending throughout the Muslim world; the long-term goal is to bring the entire world under Muslim rule.⁵⁵

Despite HuT’s well-documented support of the destruction of Israel, it does not directly engage in Islamist terrorism, nor do its branches maintain an armed wing. Rather, HuT seeks to “agitate and educate”⁵⁶ people in order to rally support for the idea of restoring the caliphate. While no reliable figures can be found regarding HuT’s membership in the PNA, it is widely considered to be marginal.

To voice opposition to the 2007 Annapolis conference, HuT organized a demonstration with over 2,500 attendees in Hebron, culminating in the killing of one protestor by PA police. Soon after, over 10,000 gathered in Al-Bireh under the leadership of HuT in support of the slogan: “the caliphate is the rising force.”⁵⁷ Most recently, in July 2010, PA security forces arrested thousands of HuT supporters rallying in Ramallah to lament the end of the caliphate, despite the rally being banned by the PA.⁵⁸

Fatah

Though formally secular, the Palestinian Authority’s ruling Fatah faction exhibits Islamist leanings. Its name, literally meaning “opening,” is taken from the early Islamic conquests. The name of the military wing,⁵⁹ known as the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade, is full of Islamic symbolism—from the importance of the al-Aqsa mosque, to the Islamist notion of “martyrdom,” i.e., suicide bombings.

When he was alive, former Fatah leader Yasser Arafat at times “embraced Islamism and violence. At other times, he embraced secularism and talked of peace.”⁶⁰ His contradictory statements are

a byproduct of the Islamist doctrine of *taqiyya* (deceit, or double-speak to be employed in times of weakness).⁶¹ Soon after the Oslo Accords, Arafat also stated that “the *jihad* will continue and Jerusalem is not for the Palestinian people alone.... It is for the entire Muslim *umma*.”⁶² The sincerity of Arafat’s rhetoric is unclear; it may just have been Fatah’s attempt to win the support of an increasingly Islamist Palestinian population. Efforts to expand the organization’s mass appeal might have been successful had it not been for its ruthless offensive in 2007 against Hamas, which led many Palestinians to fear Fatah and wonder “whether the Fatah-backed PA was any less brutal than Hamas in Gaza.”⁶³

Often seen as the only moderate faction in the PA, Fatah has traditionally received financial aid from foreign countries, including many Arab and Middle Eastern countries, the United States (which, in addition, has provided military training),⁶⁴ the EU, and even Israel on occasion in attempts to strengthen prospects for peace as well as to neutralize Hamas.⁶⁵

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Circumstantial evidence suggests that Hamas is more popular among Palestinians than its formally-secular rival Fatah. This was true even before Hamas’ unexpected victory in the PA’s 2006 legislative election, and the trendline has continued since the organization’s abrupt seizure of power in Gaza in January 2007.

Some analysts stress that such support is attributable more to a rejection of Fatah’s corruption than sincere support for Hamas’ Islamism.⁶⁶ However, polls show conflicting data. According to one study carried out in June 2009, support for Hamas had declined sharply in the West Bank and Gaza following the Hamas-Israel conflict in late 2008, due primarily to discontent with slow-moving Palestinian unity talks and Israel’s ban on Gaza reconstruction.⁶⁷ But this is not to suggest that Palestinians are embracing peace. Indeed, data collected in 2009 by the Pew Research Center for the People & Press suggest that there is strong support (68 percent) within the PA for suicide bombings and other terrorist operations in order to “defend Islam from its enemies.”⁶⁸

According to yet another poll, 58 percent of Gazans disapprove of Hamas' performance in governing, including its implementation of sharia.⁶⁹ Older data, however, found that 79.9 percent of Palestinians want the PA to follow *sharia* and 68.6 percent wanted *sharia* to be the exclusive code of law.⁷⁰ This may imply that there is more support for Islamism in theory rather than in practice. It should be noted that the reliability of most Middle-East polling data has been questioned by various analysts.⁷¹

Evidence also indicates that Christian minorities living under the PA suffer discrimination and persecution, including "entirely religiously motivated" attacks on churches, destruction of crosses and altars, and the kidnapping and forced conversion of Christian girls.⁷² Because of this continued violence, Israeli scholar Justus Reid Weiner warned that "the very existence of the 2000 year-old Christian community is in doubt."⁷³ Even Christian participation in Palestinian intifadas may have been a product of "a frightened minority attempting to protect itself in a hostile and volatile environment," as American expert Jonathan Schanzer wrote in his book, *Hamas vs. Fatah*.⁷⁴

The PA, whether under the leadership of Fatah or Hamas, constantly finds itself in a balancing act. When Fatah was in power, Hamas accused them of being too moderate and "selling the land [of the Palestinians to the Zionist enemy]."⁷⁵ Similarly, since Hamas has taken control it has been accused by various splinter groups of being too moderate and appeasing to the Israelis. Though the PA occasionally restricts Islamist activities within its jurisdiction, with praise from Israeli security officials,⁷⁶ it is more common for the PA to appease Islamist groups. For example, it cancelled a "Miss Palestine" beauty pageant in response to Islamist complaints⁷⁷ and willingly hosts Islamist rhetoric on its television station.⁷⁸

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Since its inception in 1994, the PA has been struggling to achieve a lasting peace with Israel while at the same time being dogged by charges that it is abetting terrorists within its borders. Certainly

Yasser Arafat's reputation as the Arab world's most famous terrorist (that is, until the rise of Osama bin Laden) played a key role in the criticism despite his sudden elevation to the position of a key partner in the peace process. The right of self-governance in the Gaza Strip and West Bank were predicated on Arafat's renunciation of violence which resulted in occasional joint Israeli-Palestinian patrols. According to a 2009 study by Israel's Security Agency, joint patrols have been a key factor in reducing the number of terrorist attacks emanating from the West Bank.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the threat of rising Islamism remains a concern, particularly in Gaza. Then, as now, radical Islamist groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad continued to conduct suicide operations against Israeli targets, albeit without the tacit blessing that they might have received prior to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Islamism within the PNA is simply too strong to suppress altogether.

The death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004 paved the way for a comparative moderate, Mahmoud Abbas, to assume the presidency of the PA. While Abbas continues to enjoy support, however limited at times, from Israeli and American policymakers, he is not above appeasing his more radical brethren and has even on occasion called into question Israel's right to exist⁸⁰ justifying the "resistance" against it by invoking international law.⁸¹ Such statements, however, have done little to placate Palestinian extremists. Even Fatah's own armed wing, the al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades, which remained largely dormant during the Arafat years, has since joined forces with other terrorist groups in Gaza, suggesting that Abbas does not wield the same authority that Arafat possessed over the Palestinian people.

Arguably the most vitriolic anti-Abbas sentiment comes from Hamas, which emerged as the biggest winner of the 2006 legislative elections, leading to an uncomfortable unity government that quickly collapsed due to tensions between Fatah and Hamas. What followed, and is still being played out by the two factions, is a heated conflict known locally as wakseh. In December 2006, fol-

lowing already-heightened tensions and occasional clashes between supporters on both sides, Hamas alleged that the Palestinian Prime Minister and senior Hamas official Ismail Haniyah had been the target of a failed assassination plot by Fatah.⁸² By June 2007, Hamas and Fatah were fighting for control over Gaza. Hamas obtained the upper hand, assuming all government duties and effectively running Fatah out of town. Shortly thereafter, Hamas reiterated its desire to turn the Palestinian Territories into an Islamist state, and even changed the name of one Gaza neighborhood from Tel al-Hawa to Tel al-Islam.⁸³ Fatah officials have since expressed concern over a potential coup in the West Bank by Hamas,⁸⁴ further hampering the PA's ability to achieve peace and stability within its borders. The war of words escalated once again in January 2009, upon the expiration of Abbas's term as president. Abbas unilaterally extended his rule, prompting a swift backlash from Hamas, which blasted his presidency as "illegitimate."⁸⁵

A number of Arab states have waded in to Palestinian politics in an effort to end the wakseh, seeking to reconcile the two parties—albeit so far without without success.⁸⁶ To this day, the PA continues to operate in a diminished capacity thereby hampering any real short-term prospects for peace with Israel and undermining the PA's ability to establish effective security mechanisms, particularly in Gaza.

ENDNOTES

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