



PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Quick Facts

Population: *West Bank*: 2,949,246, *Gaza Strip*: 1,957,062

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

Ethnic Groups: *West Bank*: Palestinian Arab, Jewish, 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 June 2021)

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 the West Bank and Gaza. As a result of the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, Hamas became the largest faction in the PLC with 72 seats. However, the rival Fatah faction, backed by Western governments concerned with 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 to reunify through formal elections. Conflict between Gaza and Israel erupted soon thereafter, however, and it became clear that Hamas fully controlled the territory. A follow-up reconciliation agreement in October 2017 failed to end the division, as have recent reconciliation talks between the two sides. Fatah maintains an iron grip on the West Bank, while Hamas remains the true power broker in Gaza. In the aftermath of the most recent May 2021 Hamas-Israel war, however, there are indications that Hamas’ popularity is on the rise in territories controlled by the PA.

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 has 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 "resist." 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, 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 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 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 no Hamas leaders are willing to acknowledge the pre-1967 borders or to 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 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 society there. However, there are indications that this may have only served to undermine the movement's authority, curtailing social and cultural freedoms that had previously existed in the territory.¹¹ Additionally, press reports indicate that Hamas has been losing popularity due to its poor management of Gaza's festering economic and social problems, among other issues.¹²

Following 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 after suffering attacks by an al-Qaeda affiliate in 2004.¹³

Iran soon became Hamas' primary state sponsor, with hundreds of millions of dollars pledged and delivered.¹⁴ This revenue stream was significantly and adversely impacted over time as U.S.-led sanctions sapped the Islamic Republic's cash reserves, and 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, while Hamas did not, and vacated its headquarters in Damascus in protest. However, following the regional decline of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the victory of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, and its own economic troubles, Hamas has recently restored its ties with Iran.¹⁵ In the interim, Hamas reportedly expanded its ties with Turkey and Qatar, who at present are the group's – and the Gaza Strip's – primary state sponsors; indeed, by one count, Qatar alone has funneled \$1 billion into Hamas-controlled Gaza since 2012.¹⁶

Hamas augments its funds from state sponsors with donations from private charities (the most notorious being the now-defunct Texas-based Holy Land Foundation, which channeled \$12 million to the organization before it was proscribed¹⁷) and deep-pocketed donors around the world. Hamas has also extracted significant tax revenues from the subterranean tunnels connecting the Gaza Strip to the Sinai Peninsula. For years the tunnels supported black market trade; however, since the overthrow 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, this has slashed approximately \$230 million per month from the Gaza economy.¹⁸ As a result, Hamas authorities have greatly increased local taxes in an effort to make up the budgetary shortfall.¹⁹ Nevertheless, these steps have not been enough to ameliorate the group's financial distress stemming from ongoing Israeli, Egyptian and (more recent) PA curbs on economic activity inside Gaza.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 The group's late founder, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, is known to have remarked that "We cannot separate the wing from the body. If we do so, the body will not be able to fly."²² In recent years Israeli authorities foiled numerous Hamas terror plots emanating from the West Bank.²³ Israeli officials identified Gaza-based Hamas official Fathi Hamad²⁴ and Turkey-based Hamas leader Saleh al-Aruri²⁵ as key catalysts for many of these plots.²⁶ Meanwhile Hamas maintains a significant arsenal, primarily via Iran, which gives the faction the ability to fire deep into Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip.

After the 2014 war, Hamas continued to build tunnels into Israel and attempt to replenish its rocket supply.²⁷ Hamas regularly uses items meant for humanitarian aid to construct rockets.²⁸ The group has also carried out attacks across the West Bank, such as the fatal shooting of an Israeli rabbi in early 2018.²⁹ The group has also in the past planned attacks against Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas.³⁰ Hamas was also known to cooperate with an ISIS affiliate in Sinai, originally known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, which escalated tensions with the Egyptian government between 2014-2017.³¹ Hamas regularly trained and treated Islamic State fighters before sending them back into the Sinai Peninsula.³² However, more recently, Hamas-ISIS ties have reportedly eroded as a result of pressure from the Egyptian government and the group's efforts to repair relations with Cairo.³³

With economic, humanitarian, and social conditions continuing to deteriorate in Gaza, Hamas began supporting protest marches on the Israeli border in March 2018.³⁴ The goal of the marches was nominally the "right of return" for Palestinians who had been evicted or fled from their lands in 1948; however, Hamas' real goal was increased international awareness for Gaza's plight in order to end the Israeli and Egyptian blockade.³⁵ Beginning in May 2018, weekly clashes on the border led to periodic escalations between Hamas (rocket fire) and the Israeli military (airstrikes and tank fire) which Egyptian and international mediators quickly reigned in. Hamas fired over 400 rockets and mortars at southern Israel over the course of two days in November 2018.³⁶ After months of weekly demonstrations and periodic escalations, during which over 200 Gazan civilians and militants were killed due to Israeli fire,³⁷ Hamas extracted additional funds, primarily from Qatar (with Israeli approval) to pay for civil servant salaries, fuel imports, and humanitarian projects.³⁸ Yet Hamas' objective of additional relief and an end to the blockade via a long-term truce with Israel remained elusive. By February 2019, Israeli military intelligence assessed that Hamas could capably escalate conflict in an attempt to gain further concessions from Israel.³⁹

The organization did so in May of 2021. The renewed hostilities were attributed to fresh Israeli-Palestinian frictions over things like denial of access to parts of Jerusalem, as well as controversial Israeli court decisions relating to property ownership by Israeli Arabs. However, the conflict also had a distinctly domestic dimension, and reflected an effort by Hamas to reclaim popular relevance in the wake of PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas' decision to indefinitely postpone legislative and presidential elections.⁴⁰ The resulting two-week conflict saw Hamas fire some 4,000 short-range rockets at Israeli population centers,

and Israel launch a major military campaign in Gaza (dubbed “Operation Guardian of the Walls”) in response. A ceasefire between the two sides was eventually reached, in part as a result of significant international pressure. However, the conflict has resulted in concrete benefits for Hamas in the form of a potentially significant shift in identification among Palestinians; polling done after the conflict by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found a significant surge in support for Hamas.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 the members of Hamas, felt that the Brotherhood was too moderate and its commitment to the principle of *jihad* and a Palestinian state governed according to *sharia*. 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 compromise with 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 Shiite presence due to Iranian support.⁴⁵

While PIJ was known for its suicide bombing attacks during the second *intifada* (2000-2005), the group has recently focused on rocket and sniper attacks and cross-border attack tunnel construction. The IDF has tried to thin PIJ’s ranks through targeted killings and arrests in recent years; the effectiveness of these actions is 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 group leaders 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 was also a strong supporter of the wave of violence (known as the “knife *intifada*” by some) that swept across Israel for nearly a year in 2015-2016. In May 2016 Iran renewed its financial support of PIJ after nearly two years.⁴⁸ In Tehran, PIJ leader Ramadan Shallah praised Iran for its support of the “Palestinian *intifada*.”⁴⁹ When municipal elections were initially announced in the West Bank and Gaza in August 2016, PIJ boycotted the elections, as it had done on all previous occasions, unsuccessfully urging Palestinians to escalate the violence instead.⁵⁰

PIJ plays an integral role in the Gaza marches on the Israel border, with several of its members reported killed by Israeli fire during the months of unrest that began in March 2018.⁵¹ More recently, PIJ was held responsible for rocket and mortar fire from Gaza into southern Israel—a sign, according to some, of renewed Iranian influence on Palestinian politics.⁵² This trend continued with two major incidents from Gaza – a rocket barrage into southern Israel in October 2018⁵³ and sniper fire on Israeli forces in January 2019.⁵⁴ By April 2019, Israeli security sources were warning of a major cross-border PIJ attack meant to scuttle Egypt’s mediation efforts between Israel and Hamas.⁵⁵

PIJ’s pursuit of a policy ostensibly independent of Hamas was attributed in part to Ziad al-Nakhaleh’s promotion to secretary-general (replacing the infirm Shallah).⁵⁶ Reports indicate that al-Nakhaleh is more militant than Shallah, and may seek to solidify his authority and continue currying favor with Iran by adopting hardline policies.⁵⁷

Popular Resistance Committees

The Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) is made up of “former armed activists of different factions,”

and is likely the third largest violent group in the Palestinian Authority, after Hamas and PIJ.⁵⁸ According to the IDF, the PRC often “acts as a sub-contractor” for Iran, and is heavily influenced by Hezbollah.⁵⁹

In recent years, the group has become increasingly Salafi in outlook and reportedly begun working with Salafi jihadist groups operating in the Sinai Peninsula abutting Gaza.⁶⁰ In February 2014, the Israeli Air Force targeted a PRC operative known to work with the Sinai-based *jihadist* group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis.⁶¹

However, 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 demanded Hamas stop its arrest of the mujahideen in the Gaza Strip.⁶² 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 targeting Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel was deemed to be a PRC operation.⁶³ More recently, the PRC’s military wing issued a public call for Bitcoin donations, highlighting the group’s financial distress and its continued militant activities.⁶⁴

Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades

The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (AAMB) is the military wing of the secular Fatah faction, and has adopted Islamist symbols and slogans.⁶⁵ The group was formally designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States in March 2002, largely due to its responsibility for suicide bombings and small arms attacks targeting Israel during the second *intifada*.⁶⁶

While the AAMB has primarily operated out of the Gaza Strip, with a handful of operations in the West Bank, the group has largely remained dormant over the past few years.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 In recent years, however, press reports have suggested that the group may seek a comeback in the West Bank.⁷⁰ In March 2016, thirteen Palestinians were injured in firefights between the Palestinian Authority and members of the Aqsa Martyrs in Nablus.⁷¹ As clashes escalated in August 2016, the PA arrested a local AAMB leader, Ahmed Izz Halawa, and beat him to death.⁷² Halawa’s death sparked mass protests in the West Bank.⁷³ 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 2018.⁷⁴

Group members have taken part in (and been killed during) the “March of Return” border protests of 2018.⁷⁵ Training for attacks against Israel is ongoing. AAMB has publicly stated that, during any future conflict, it would fight alongside Hamas, PIJ and the other Gaza-based factions.⁷⁶

Jaysh al-Islam (JI)

Jaysh al-Islam (JI), or “Army of Islam,” is closely linked to the Dughmush clan of Gaza, and it is believed to have several hundred members.⁷⁷ Founded in 2005, JI is similar to other Palestinian Islamist splinter groups due to its global *jihadist* objectives and suspected ties to al-Qaeda in its early days.⁷⁸

The group’s affinity for al-Qaeda is widely documented. Days after the death of Osama bin Laden, JI released a eulogy for the fallen al-Qaeda leader.⁷⁹ In May 2011 the group was designated as a terrorist group by the U.S. Department of State. The accompanying press release noted that JI “worked with Hamas and is attempting to develop closer al Qaeda contacts.”⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ 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.”⁸²

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.⁸³ According to Israeli officials, JI operated training camps in Gaza for jihadists (with the blessing of Hamas) who subsequently went to fight in Yemen, Syria, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, among other locations.⁸⁴ According to one JI leader, however, the group is not officially allied with either al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.⁸⁵

Recently Hamas has cracked down on Salafist groups operating from Gaza, including JI, in a bid to rehabilitate its relationship with the Egyptian government and curb rocket fire against Israel.⁸⁶

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.”⁸⁷ The Salafi *jihadist* group was formed in either 2006 or 2007, 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.⁸⁸

JU has historically been critical of Hamas. Most notably, it has criticized Hamas for arresting its members as they attempted to carry out terrorist operations.⁸⁹ Hamas appears to allow JU to conduct *dawa*-related activity in the Gaza Strip, however.⁹⁰

JU has warned against the increasing influence of Iran and its proxy PIJ in the Gaza Strip. While the group has denied an operational connection to al-Qaeda, it maintains a similar ideological outlook as the bin Laden network.⁹¹ 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.⁹²

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.”⁹³ 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.”⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ In November 2013 the group issued a eulogy for Hakeemullah Mehsud, the former emir of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan.⁹⁶ JU supposedly fought alongside other militant factions against Israel during the 2014 Gaza War.⁹⁷ As of June 2018, JU was still launching fundraising appeals to supporters via various social media platforms.⁹⁸

Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT)

The Palestinian “Party of Liberation” is a local affiliate of the larger international HuT movement. The group's immediate aim is to establish a caliphate and implement *sharia* law throughout the Muslim world.⁹⁹

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.”¹⁰⁰ While no reliable figures can be found regarding HuT's membership in the Palestinian Authority, it is widely considered to be small, despite its organic base of support.

HuT organized a demonstration with over 2,500 attendees in Hebron, dissenting against the PLO's participation in the 2007 Annapolis peace summit; in the aftermath, one protestor was killed by PA police.¹⁰¹ Over 10,000 HuT supporters gathered in Al-Bireh under the slogan: “the caliphate is the rising force.”¹⁰² In July 2010, PA security forces arrested thousands of HuT supporters at a rally in Ramallah.¹⁰³

HuT members were arrested by the Palestinian Authority after PA forces disrupted an HuT rally in the West Bank.¹⁰⁴ In August 2011, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas drew fire from HuT when Abbas suggested that NATO may have a presence in a future Palestinian state.¹⁰⁵

HuT has continued to hold events in the West Bank despite intermittent security crackdowns.¹⁰⁶ In February 2014, HuT accused Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank of arresting its

members for criticizing President Abbas.¹⁰⁷ The group was represented during the unrest in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Shuafat following the murder of a Palestinian teenager by Israeli extremists.

In recent years, HuT activities have been confined primarily to West Bank universities.¹⁰⁸ However, the group still maintains an elaborate media outreach and education arm online, issuing constant press releases on current developments in PA politics, international politics and Israeli actions.¹⁰⁹

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.¹¹⁰ In November 2012, one MSC leaders stated that the group aims to “fight the Jews for the return of Islam’s rule, not only in Palestine, but throughout the world.”¹¹¹

While the exact size of the group is unknown, it claims responsibility for a number of rocket attacks against Israel, some of which have been carried out with Jaysh al Islam.¹¹² MSC took responsibility for a June 2012 bombing and shooting attack that killed one Israeli civilian.¹¹³ According to a video released by the MSC, the June attack was “a gift to our brothers in Qaedat al Jihad [al-Qaeda] and Sheikh [Ayman al-Zawahiri]” and a retaliation for the killing of Osama bin Laden.¹¹⁴

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.”¹¹⁵ Throughout 2013, the MSC promoted the *jihad* in Syria as well as the efforts of the Sinai-based jihadist group Ansar Bayt al Maqdis through its media wing.¹¹⁶ In November 2013, three MSC operatives were reported killed by Israeli security forces in Yatta ahead of planned terrorist attacks.¹¹⁷

MSC attacks peaked in 2013 with several instances of rocket fire on Israeli towns, including in April and August of that year on the southern city of Eilat (likely emanating from the Sinai Peninsula). MSC also declared its support for the Islamic State in February 2014. In response, the U.S. State Department declared MSC a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity.¹¹⁸ Prominent MSC leaders have recently been targeted for arrest by Hamas authorities in Gaza (as part of broader crackdowns on Salafist groups), likely explaining the organization’s diminished profile.¹¹⁹

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.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ Since then, As-Sabirin has lost two fighters in apparent clashes with Israel.

As-Sabirin is a Shiite group in a predominantly Sunni territory. Its flag and logo are inspired by Hezbollah, and its fighters are pulled from another Iranian proxy: PIJ. 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.”¹²²

As-Sabirin is headed by Hisham Salem, a former PIJ commander from a prominent family in Gaza.¹²³ During the second *intifada*, Salem was placed on Israel’s most wanted terrorist list.¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵

The Iranian proxy group receives approximately \$10 million per year from Tehran typically smuggled through tunnels into Gaza.¹²⁶

In February 2016, the Palestinian Authority broke up an as-Sabirin cell in Bethlehem attempting to

convert families in the West Bank to Shiism.¹²⁷ In January 2018, the U.S. State Department announced that as-Sabirin was now a “Specially-Designated Global Terrorist Group.”¹²⁸

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Evidence suggests that Hamas has been, at several points in the past, more popular among Palestinians than its secular rival, Fatah. Some analysts contend that such support is attributable more to a rejection of Fatah’s alleged corruption rather than sincere support for Hamas’ Islamism and militancy.¹²⁹ However, it may also be tied to the dwindling popular support, for the PLO’s peace negotiations with Israel. An April 2019 poll from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that 50 percent of Palestinians now oppose a two-state solution; 58 percent do not believe it is feasible due to Israeli settlement expansion. More indicative, Palestinians were evenly split over the question of negotiations versus armed resistance vis-à-vis Israel.¹³⁰

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.¹³¹ 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.”¹³² Most telling, opinion polls in late 2018 showed a slight increase in support for Hamas (relative to the PLO/Fatah) due primarily to the lack of a diplomatic process with Israel, concessions wrung for Gaza from the “March of Return” protests, and Abbas’s long rule.¹³³ By early 2019, those numbers dropped due to Hamas’s violent suppression of internal protests,¹³⁴ as well as the adverse consequences of its escalation of hostilities with Israel. Under both Hamas rule in Gaza and PLO rule in the West Bank, evidence suggests that Christian minorities suffer discrimination and persecution, including religiously-motivated attacks on churches, destruction of crosses and altars, and the kidnapping and forced conversion of Christian girls.¹³⁵ Admittedly, Christians live with significantly more freedom in the West Bank relative to Gaza since Hamas took control of the coastal territory.¹³⁶

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. Close security coordination between the PA and Israel has remained intact in the battle against perceived common Islamist enemies. Indeed, Hamas marches in the West Bank in December 2018, on the anniversary of the group’s founding, were violently suppressed by PA security forces.¹³⁷ This approach has undoubtedly been successful; the West Bank has been relatively stable over the past decade compared to preceding years.¹³⁸

With Hamas entrenched in Gaza, Israel will not likely neutralize the group with stand-off military power alone. The 2014 conflict made this clear; even as Israel pounded hundreds of Hamas targets, long-range rockets continued to strike deep into Israeli territory. Some propose that Israel should enter into negotiations with its long-time foe. Others contend that, because Hamas is at one of its historically weakest political and economic points, now may be the time to cripple the group.

The question of who controls Gaza after Hamas has prompted the Israelis to opt for the former approach. 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.¹³⁹ As of early 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had clearly chosen to enter into talks with Hamas via mediation from Egypt, funneling economic relief into Gaza and stating that “Leaders need to find a way...to return security [to southern Israel], to avoid humanitarian collapse and avoid needless wars.”¹⁴⁰

The shift in Israel’s Gaza policy can be attributed in part to the collapse of the reconciliation process

between Hamas and Fatah. Under the terms of multiple agreements that were never fully implemented, Fatah/PA would retake civilian control over Gaza, sparing Hamas the financial and political burdens of governance. Yet a major sticking point for PA President Mahmoud Abbas remains Hamas's unwillingness to disarm, which he has termed the "Hezbollah model."¹⁴¹ Repeated abortive negotiations over a "unity government" in recent years (most recently in the Fall of 2020) highlight that real reconciliation and unity between Gaza and the West Bank, and between Hamas and Fatah, remain unlikely, and as a result their respective political systems will likely remain separate for the foreseeable future.¹⁴²

ENDNOTES

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