

# DIIS REPORT

**GAZA'S NEW ISLAMISTS:**  
THE ATOMIZATION OF PALESTINIAN  
ISLAMISM SINCE 2006

*Leila Stockmarr*

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## Indhold

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Abstract</b>  | 4  |
| <b>Executive Summary</b>   | 4  |
| <b>1. Introduction</b>   | 7  |
| The Report   | 8  |
| Background: dire straits in Gaza   | 10 |
| <b>2. The Insertion of Islamism into Palestinian Politics and External Reactions</b> | 12 |
| 2006: not shocking, but a logical consequence  | 13 |
| Mecca and the June 2007 takeover   | 15 |
| <b>3. Hamas' Rule in Gaza: Governing the Ungovernable</b>                            | 18 |
| Ruling Gaza  | 18 |
| Oppressive trends – downscaling ideology   | 20 |
| Hamas' dilemma: between pragmatism and integrity                                     | 22 |
| <b>4. Gaza's New Islamists</b>   | 25 |
| The debate: Palestinian al-Qaeda-ism   | 25 |
| Hamas versus al-Qaeda – some differences   | 26 |
| Areas of dissent: between al-da'wa and jihadism                                      | 28 |
| 'Rolling thunder': introducing Gaza's new jihadis                                    | 30 |
| An Islamic Emirate in Gaza?  | 33 |
| New Shi'a presence in Gaza – exporting the Iranian model?                            | 36 |
| Withdrawal from the political sphere: educating and agitating for public piety       | 37 |
| Non-violent Islamists as political instruments                                       | 39 |
| Hizb ut-Tahrir: pacifist but aggressive  | 39 |
| A politicised puzzle   | 41 |
| <b>5. Conclusion</b>   | 43 |

## **Abstract**

The emergence of new Islamist groups challenging Hamas from within is demarcating a new tendency towards inter-Islamist rivalry in Gaza. Based on original empirical data this report maps the Islamist milieu in Gaza. It offers a critical examination of how Hamas has governed Gaza since 2007 and why *new* Islamist groups in Gaza have emerged. The report argues that the phenomenon of new Islamists is diffuse and intangible. It does, however, relate to the question of the ideological price of governing in Palestine, and the repercussions of Hamas' rule and external policies upon the Islamist milieu in Gaza where, for the first time, an Islamist political body is in power. Two major aspects are motivating the emergence of new Islamist agendas: people's ideological grievances towards those in power and the instrumentalisation of ideology and religion in the midst of a power struggle between an increasingly authoritarian political body and its dissidents and challengers. In the face of governments which are failing to deliver, non-organised religious activity has become political power in Gaza.

## **Executive Summary**

This report offers an overview and analysis of the Islamist milieu in Gaza. While Hamas was an initial incubator of Islamism in the Gaza Strip, today within the realm of Palestinian politics this concept goes beyond Hamas to encompass other groups and strands of Islamism. After four years of holding the political power in Gaza Hamas has been punished both for its use of violence and agenda of Islamisation and for its strategic turn towards more moderate and pragmatic political avenues; the former by the international community and the latter by Islamist hardliners seeking to provide an alternative religio-political platform for Islamic activism and resistance to Israeli occupation. Indeed, in exploring Hamas' predicament and the path to atomisation of the Islamist milieu in Gaza there is a strong correlation between Western and Israeli policies and the emergence of new Islamist hardliners seeking to challenge Hamas' position.

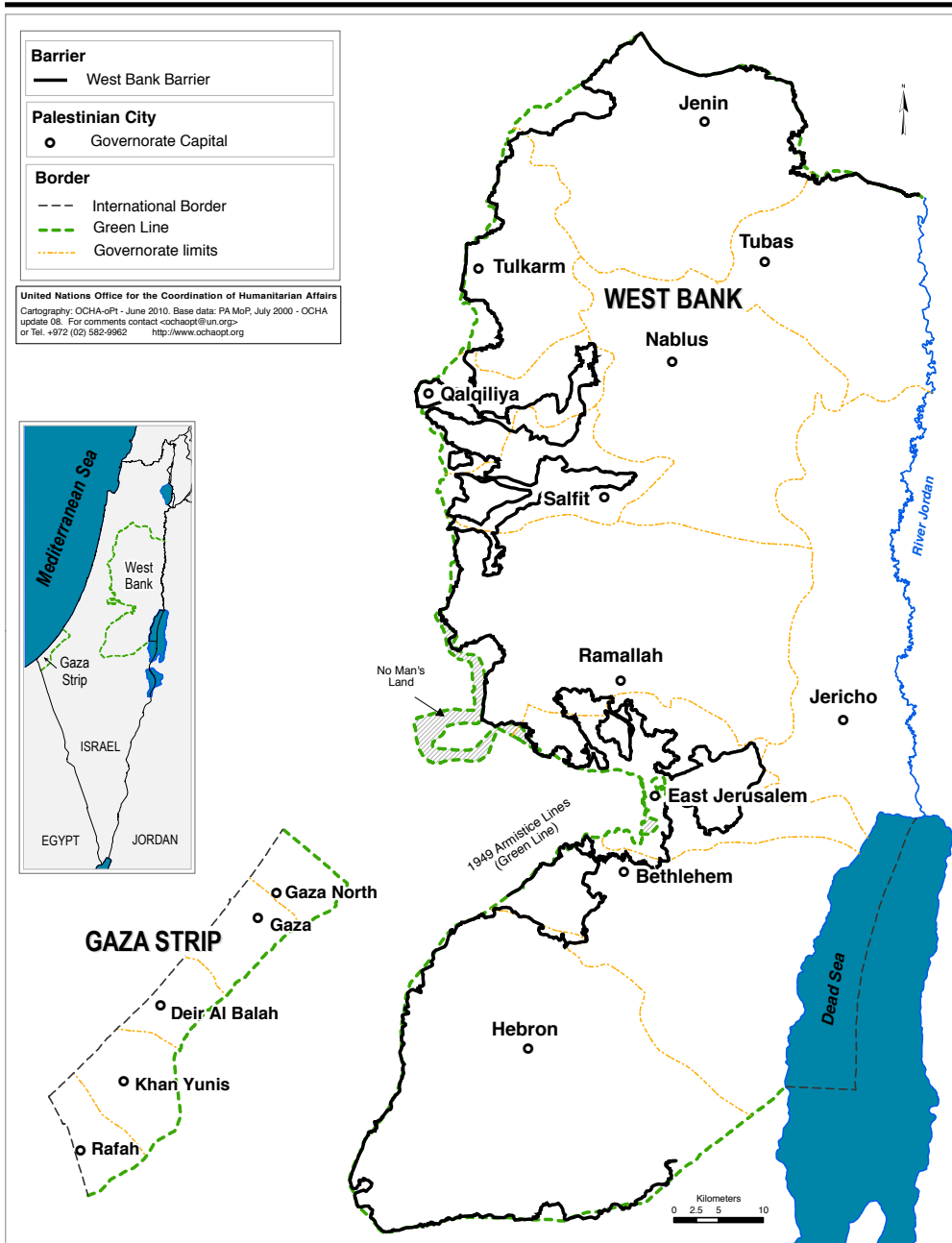
By looking into and contextualising the Islamisation of Palestinian politics or, perhaps more fittingly, the ‘Palestinianisation’ of Islamist politics, the dividing line between radical and moderate actors in Palestinian politics does not per se run along the lines of secular and religious orientations. Shifts in political identity also need to be understood in relation to the dilemmas, challenges and contradictions facing any political authority shifting its efforts from the publicly much anticipated national struggle for statehood to daily tasks of public administration under the non-sovereign, limited, Palestinian self rule.

The emergence of new-fangled Salafi orientations, either adhering to the educational *Salafi da’wa* or to the more militant *jihadi* strands, is an expression of an increased confusion within Hamas about how to deal with the challenge of satisfying both the international community’s demands and, locally, more radical cadres advocating violent armed resistance against Israel, as well as continued demands for the Islamisation of Palestinian society. The development is not only pointing towards more violence: it also entails a process of turning inwards towards pious or more violent variants of Islam. These new orientations have provided stable and fixed stances in a context of occupation, weak governmental institutions and rapidly changing levels of internal and external violence and deteriorating humanitarian conditions.

The common Islamist background of the challengers does not make them into one unified opposition of dissenters. The Gazans involved use different methods and represent different layers of society tied to various economic and social substructures. The main lines of division between the groups are demarcated by their diverse approaches to armed resistance and their different and changing focuses on fighting the Israeli occupation or struggling to reform Palestinian society from within. The Islamist milieu needs to be understood in the context of a socio-political environment where new alliances are constantly being shaped and where political opportunity is found when once radical groups mature to become a part of the formal system. This is what happens when ideology meets power politics, aspirations of violent resistance, traditional social systems, occupational structures and a highly unprepared and self-limiting international community.



# The occupied Palestinian territory: Overview map



## I. Introduction

During the last years several incidents of kidnapping and killing of westerners in Gaza have been generally portrayed as part of a new phenomenon of groups waging global *jihad* towards Israel and the West from the small coastal enclave of Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Along with several military operations carried out by *new* groups against Israel or internal targets in Gaza, this has led to talk of a new al-Qaeda (AQ) presence in Gaza and consequently an increased radicalisation of Palestinian politics. This points to a new tension between nationalist Islamism and transnational *jihadi* aspirations, but perhaps more so, in the absence of sovereignty and increasing dependency on aid from the outside, it points to the failure of the Authority in power to govern democratically and fairly.<sup>2</sup>

The main purpose of this report is to examine the phenomenon of new Islamists in Gaza, to address Palestinian Islamism as a multidirectional force, to explore the repercussions of this upon the Islamist milieu in Palestine and in Gaza more particularly, and to explore the conditions for and the conditions of governing as an Islamist party in Palestine. The main questions to address are:

*How has Hamas dealt with the challenge of governing and how has this affected the Islamist spectrum inside Gaza?*<sup>3</sup>

*Why have new Islamist groups challenging Hamas from within emerged in Gaza? Are they consolidated political actors and what are their grievances and ideological platforms?*

<sup>1</sup> Most significant was the abduction of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006. Also, among others, were the two-week long kidnapping of two Fox News journalists in 2006, the almost four-month long kidnapping of BBC journalist Alan Johnston in 2007, and in April 2011 the killing in Gaza of the Italian activist Vittorio Arrigoni, hanged by a small group of Islamists.

<sup>2</sup> In this report Islamism refers to both activists and movements performing Islamic activism adhering to the ideology of resurgent Islam which seeks to reconcile tradition and modernity or, as Lybarger clarifies in a Palestinian context, the employment of religious key symbols, discourses and narratives of Islam to reinterpret the meaning and goals of national political resistance and solidarity. Loren D. Lybarger (2007), "Identity and Religion in Palestine", Princeton University Press, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> The largest Sunni Islamist organisation in Palestine. Hamas was founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Mahmud Zahar in 1987 during the first intifada as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Today the leader of its politburo in Damascus is Khaled Meshal and the Hamas Prime Minister in Gaza is Ismail Haniyeh. Hamas is perceived as part of a movement of political Islamism giving priority to both political action and political proselytism. Operating under Israeli military occupation it has deviated from its brothers in Jordan and Egypt by initially adopting a more violent strategy.

The report argues that rather than seeing the increased insertion of Islam into Palestinian politics as a process of Islamisation of Palestinian politics, it might be more fruitful to see the process as a ‘Palestinianisation’ of Islamist politics. The divide between ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ political actors does not per se run along the lines of the secular and religious, but happens at the intersection of local, regional and global politics. The extension of and increase in activity of radical Islamist groups in Gaza are not so much an expression of actual al-Qaeda presence on the ground as a manifestation of new ideological strands within Palestinian Islamism as a variant of Palestinian nationalism which is drawing from transnational ideology to counter the more pragmatic Hamas – these are ‘home-grown’ movements which are tightly connected to contextual changes within Gazan society.

The analysis will look into the transformation of the political landscape in Gaza since the international imposition of sanctions which followed Hamas’ victory and entry into government in 2006. It will argue that there is a direct link between the international isolation of Hamas, the groups governing in Gaza and the rise of new Islamist-jihadist factions emerging out of the socio-political fabric in Gaza. The recent appearance of such groups needs to be seen against the backdrop of the tendency that governing in Palestine comes at the high price, for both secularists and Islamists, of being at the expense of ideology – which leaves the privilege of being more ideological to those in opposition.

## **The Report**

After a short preface on the political geography of Gaza, the **second part** provides a background analysis of the conditions for governing in Palestine, the insertion of Islamism into Palestinian politics, the reasons behind Hamas’ strengthened role as a signifier of Palestinian politics and finishes with some reflections on the international community’s reactions. The **third part** provides an account of Hamas’ experience of governing Gaza since its takeover in 2007. The **fourth part** introduces the debate over al-Qaeda in Gaza, followed by an examination of the areas of dissent that define the Islamists’ agendas and an exploration of the issue of new actors within the Islamist milieu in Gaza. The **sixth part** presents a conclusion.

The analysis is based on more than twenty interviews conducted with both Israelis and Palestinians during a three-week long field visit in May 2011, as well as up to date academic work, articles, websites and interviews conducted by others. The interviews conducted include some with Hamas members of the Palestinian Legis-



lative Council – hardliners as well as moderates – members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad<sup>4</sup> as well as with a range of independent Islamic Hamas dissidents and some traditional Salafis.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, interviews were also conducted with representatives of the Fatah<sup>6</sup> dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), members of the security establishment, members of Fatah and activists from independent youth groups along with several UN officials, political analysts, aid practitioners and journalists in the West Bank. In Israel interviews were conducted with leading academics of Islamist politics and Israeli politics, as well as one security advisor close to the government. Lastly, more than 20 telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs and UN officials inside Gaza. It is important to point out that most of the informants, especially Hamas representatives, were very reluctant to talk about the Islamist groups. This posed some challenges, but it also reflects two issues: firstly that Islamism as a phenomenon is not at the top of the agenda of most political actors but also, secondly, it exposes the interest of some actors in downplaying the role of new Islamists.

Despite the focus on Islamism, it remains crucial to note that a range of leftist secular groups as well as individual experts I came across espoused harsh critiques of Israel and the international community's policies, in some cases in line with the critique put forward by Islamists, albeit not in religiously motivated terms. Likewise, looking back on the historical development of the ideology of secular leftist groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in its heyday in the 1970s displays the same grievances against Israel, though framed differently and with an actual strategy of operating outside Israel/Palestine.

<sup>4</sup> Founded by Sheikh Abd Al Aziz Awda and Fathi Shiqaqi (assassinated in Malta in 1995, most likely by Israeli agents). Operating in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine/Israel and financially supported by Iran and Syria and estimated to be a small group with followers numbering in the hundreds.

<sup>5</sup> The word *Salaf* is an Arabic noun which translates as 'predecessor' or 'forefather', and the first three Muslim generations are collectively referred to as the *as-Salaf as-Saleb*, or 'The Pious Predecessors'. Salafism has, in contemporary times, become associated with literalist and puritanical approaches to Islamic theology.

<sup>6</sup> Fatah (founded by Arafat in 1954) represented the main embodiment of the Palestinian nationalist discourse that emerged in the 1960s, primarily appealing to the middle class, lower middle class and proletarianised refugee communities in the PA. With its subsequent takeover of the PLO in 1967–68 and its role in the 1967 war, the liberation movement developed into a party replete with both a civil 'wuzara' and a military 'fida'iyyan wing'. Today the party is in deep crisis. It has lost its monopoly over resistance and the PA leadership of Abbas and Fayyad (from the party the Third Way) is distancing itself from its old guard. For an excellent account see Yezid Sayigh (1997), *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, Oxford University Press.

## Background: dire straits in Gaza

Gaza is one of the most densely populated places on earth. More than 1.5 million people have been living under an unprecedented Israeli blockade since Hamas took over as the political authority in Gaza in June 2007.

Though formally disengaging from its 21 settlements in the small enclave in 2005 Israel has, under the leadership of both former Prime Ministers Sharon and Olmert and current Prime Minister Netanyahu, maintained its occupation.<sup>7</sup> Since 2006 it has imposed a closure policy or blockade, which the UN officially refers to as a form of ‘collective punishment’ of the entire Gazan population.<sup>8</sup> The blockade has triggered a “*protracted human dignity crisis*” marked by degradation in the living conditions, the erosion of livelihoods and a gradual decline in the state of essential infrastructure. Indeed, the crisis has become endemic.

Drawn large, over three-quarters of the population are refugees from 1948 and 1967, representing 22% of all registered Palestinian refugees. These demographics have their roots back in the early history of the conflict. With the establishment of the State of Israel, Gaza’s social dynamics were fundamentally changed; many *mukhtars* (leaders, representatives of villages) lost their authority and competing alliances between clans and political and religious groups emerged.<sup>10</sup> In fact a considerable part of the resourceful population emigrated to the West, which de facto placed the urban middle class outside Palestine. This deprived the community of many innovative members and an immense amount of cultural capital, sparking a process of social conservatism still evolving today. Most camp dwellers to a wide extent can be considered culturally to be peasants.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of Israel’s closure policies and the Palestinian militants operating from inside Gaza, the threat of escalation in terms of military confrontations and wars between Israel and the Palestinians is imminent. However, with the calm following Cast Lead (the Israeli military offensive of winter 2008-9), in June 2010

<sup>7</sup> Despite Israeli rejection of this, both the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross consider Gaza occupied territory under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

<sup>8</sup> UN Humanitarian Chief John Holmes, Briefing to the UN Security Council on the situation in the Middle East including the Palestinian question, 27 January, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Locked in: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip*, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group, *Inside Gaza: The Challenge for Clans and Families*, 20 December 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Jamil Hilal (2006), “Emigration, Conservatism, and Class Formation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip Communities”, in Lisa Taraki (ed.), *Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance and Mobility Under Occupation*, Syracuse University Press.

Israel launched a package to ease the blockade. According to a senior UN official, the easing was the result of international pressure on Israel and the Israeli realisation that the blockade was not weakening Hamas. However the situation is still dire. As the UN's humanitarian agency recently noted: *"due to the pivotal nature of the remaining restrictions and the huge dimensions of the existing challenges, overall these measures remained ineffective in achieving a genuine improvement in the humanitarian situation"*.<sup>12</sup> After the ouster of Mubarak, on 28 May Egypt opened the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt (the Sinai) allowing more than a thousand Gazans to cross per day (except males between 18–40 years of age). The impact of this upon the political impasse remains to be seen, especially with regard to the politically sensitive question of the Sinai in the context of Israeli–Egyptian relations. In August this year a group of militants of unknown origin infiltrated Israel from the Sinai killing at least five Israelis and wounding several dozens in the area of Eilat in southern Israel. This shows possible signs of a reintegration of Egyptian territory into the armed struggle against Israel. The effects of the PLO's decision to make their bid for Palestinian UN membership in the Security Council and recognition of Palestine as a state in the General Assembly remain to be seen.

<sup>12</sup> UNOCHA, "Easing the Blockade – assessing the humanitarian impact on the population of the Gaza Strip", March 2011.

## 2. The Insertion of Islamism into Palestinian Politics and External Reactions

The signing of the Oslo Accords (1993 and 1995) granted the Palestinians limited self rule for the first time since 1948. However, despite the immense expectations that followed it, the process has only led to disappointment and increasing complications at ground level, making a political solution to the conflict less tangible. Such complications take the form of the increase in Israeli settlements, the construction of the 'Separation Barrier', de facto annexing 8–9% of Palestinian land within the internationally recognised Green Line (the armistice line until the 1967 war) and of the chronic potential for military confrontation and a politically fragmented Palestine.

The Oslo setup under Fatah dominance (still ruling in the West Bank and channeling the salaries to workers from the Palestinian Authority in Gaza) came to receive a towering level of funds from the international community to initiate its still-unfolding project of state building and internal reforms.

With the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank in 1967 the Muslim Brotherhood sought to reinstall itself, and it fast became a base of increased popularity. Indeed, right from this early presence in the Gaza Strip the brethren has been able to use the past and its traditions as a reservoir from which to articulate a political programme through a mix of patriarchal and religious values to counter the growing secular nationalism.<sup>13</sup> Hence the Gaza Strip has traditionally been the hotbed of Palestinian Islamism, but its prevalence gained especial momentum when Fatah was seen to fail to deliver under the limited self-rule during the 1990s.

Its vicinity to Egypt made a spread of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to Gaza easy. In the Oslo heyday, when optimism was still to be found, the Islamic Collective<sup>14</sup> (transforming into Hamas in 1987) followed an opposed strategy of building up an alternative socio-economic structure. Indeed, up through the 1990s Islamic social services became more important to the social cohesion of Gazan society and thus

<sup>13</sup> According to Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell (2010) Hamas Polity, the Muslim Brotherhood were already in the 1940s entering the arena of Palestinian politics through the establishment of a network of charities. Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Founded in 1973 it was also known as the *al-Mujamma' al-Islamic* – an umbrella organisation of Islamist movements and activities of mainly Muslim Brotherhood structures. In 1978 Israel allowed the collective to register as an official charitable organisation.

provided a platform from which people could express their dissent in new religio-political terms – what Lybarger terms a “counter thematizing of collective Palestinian identity”.<sup>15</sup> The erosion of nationalist ideology accelerated with the installation of the PA in Palestine. Not surprisingly, with the slow realisation that Oslo would not bring about freedom and nationhood, people started to look for alternative, new as well as old, paths of direction. Throughout the second al-Aqsa intifada Israel’s pressure on the PA to go against Hamas reinforced shifts in public sympathy in favour of the Islamists.<sup>16</sup> The prevalence of Islamism within the Palestinian nationalist discourse opened up for Hamas to conquer the political scene as the symbol of real uncompromising resistance and a political body with a ‘clean house’ as oppose to the Fatah jumble of corruption benefiting a few individuals clinging to their seats in the Oslo structure. Fatah’s security cooperation and coordination with Israel (and the West) has eroded any last sign of Fatah as an active resistance movement.

### **2006: not shocking, but a logical consequence**

In 2006 the efforts at alternative institution building, free from dependence on the West bore fruit. Hamas’ impressive victory in municipal elections in 2004–2005 and the subsequent 2006 victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections gave the movement the ability to form a majority government on their own.<sup>17</sup> This represented, as Sayigh notes, two firsts in the modern history of the region: power in an Arab polity passed on to an opposition and the victory of an Islamist movement through democratic means.<sup>18</sup>

Hamas was standing ready in the corridor. According to a professor of politics at the Palestinian Birzeit University, it decided to move onto the stage at that point as it thought it had not just a chance of winning but also a “maturity giving it real potential to govern”.<sup>19</sup> Many Palestinians voted for Hamas in 2006 because of the movement’s bold decision to enter the democratic arena – it was perceived as invigorating

<sup>15</sup> Loren D. Lybarger (2007), “Identity and Religion in Palestine”, Princeton University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell (2010), “Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement”, Polity Press, p. 220.

<sup>17</sup> The legislative body of the Palestinian Authority. This was the first election since 1996. Hamas’ party of Change and Reform won with 74 seats over Fatah’s 45. Islamic Jihad called on Palestinians to boycott the elections.

<sup>18</sup> Yezid Sayigh (2007), “Inducing a Failed State in Palestine”, in *Survival*, no 3, vol. 49, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Dr Asem Khalil, Director of Abu-Lughod School of International Studies, Birzeit University, May 2011.

news. Hamas became a provider of hope for the Palestinian national movement in the absence of any other unified force with organised structures and what could be seen as operational slogans. Under the label 'Change and Reform' the movement promised internal changes, first and foremost referring to the corruption and fatigue of Fatah and the PA's dependency on European goodwill and coordination with Israel. In this way Hamas' innate opposition to the Oslo Accords might have been the factor that brought about its leadership of that same setup. Accordingly, the overwhelming victory was not so much a question of people's adherence to the political theology of Hamas as it was a personal divorce from Fatah by many ordinary Palestinians, not necessarily interested in the extension of religion from the private to the public sphere.

The months to come became decisive for Hamas' ability to govern as the efforts of the US, the EU and Israel to neutralise and marginalise Hamas intensified significantly after 2006. Indeed this context has been highly influential upon the Islamist milieu as it gave Hamas extremely difficult conditions to govern under.

The international community's policies towards Hamas can be roughly divided into three stages:<sup>20</sup> 1) the reactions to the 2006 elections, 2) the reactions to the Mecca Agreement/National Unity Government (NUG) in 2007, and 3) the policies towards the political Authority of Hamas since its takeover of Gaza in 2007.

The electoral victory of Hamas came as a shock to the outside world, especially as the democratic process was deemed surprisingly free, transparent and fair by international observers and the Central Elections Committee.<sup>21</sup> The 2006 elections placed the international community and especially the EU in a tight spot. The EU's agenda of democratisation, which was based on the assumption that Fatah would prevail as the democratic force within Palestinian politics had not won through.<sup>22</sup> Against this backdrop the Quartet's demands were based on the hope that the Palestinians would either put pressure on Hamas to fundamentally change extremely rapidly, or for the people to completely abandon Hamas.<sup>23</sup> If these demands were

<sup>20</sup> Having the Quartet on the Middle East, which consists of Russia, the UN, EU and the US, as its main organisational body.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.elections.ps:90/template.aspx?id=331> (report in Arabic) see also, [http://www.elections.ps:90/admin/pdf/Final\\_Report\\_PL\\_C\\_Elections\\_2006\\_-\\_Text.pdf](http://www.elections.ps:90/admin/pdf/Final_Report_PL_C_Elections_2006_-_Text.pdf) (accessed June 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Hovdenak, A. "Hamas in Transition: the failure of sanctions", in *Democratization*, no. 16, vol. 1, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> The Quartet's demands to Hamas following its taking over of the PA government were related to three main issues stipulated within the diplomatic framework of the Quartet's "Roadmap for Peace" (2003): that Hamas renounce violence, recognise Israel and accept all previous agreements between the PLO and Israel.

not met, all aid (more than half of the PA's annual budget including salaries to more than 160,000 civil servants) and all political contact would be suspended.<sup>24</sup> On 7 April the US and the EU suspended aid to the Palestinian Authority,<sup>25</sup> prompting Haniyeh to give a speech at the Jabaliyya refugee camp reassuring that the boycott would not lead to the crumbling of the Hamas government.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed this created a situation where, as Sayigh defines it, the external support shifted from "*legitimate aid conditionality to active inducement of state failure*".<sup>27</sup> In addition, the sanctions imposed hit the public broadly, as well as the Fatah cadres who suffered immensely from the blow caused by the freeze in the payments of PA public sector staff, at a that time when the Israeli military had imprisoned more than half of the Hamas parliament members, de facto closing down the PLC and denying the Palestinians their main democratic body. This triggered violent clashes between Hamas' military wing the al-Qassam Brigades and Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades. In May Hamas announced the creation of a new security force in defiance of Abbas' veto under the name Executive Security Forces,<sup>28</sup> culminating with Hamas' and Islamist group Jaysh al-Islam's joint capture of Israeli soldier Galid Shalit on 25 June followed by Israeli arrests and military attacks on Gaza. In July the then EU foreign policy head Javier Solana installed an aid package to the PA, while retaining the isolation of Hamas, resulting in Hamas' increased dependence on Abbas for financial survival.<sup>29</sup>

### **Mecca and the June 2007 takeover**

At the second stage, the Mecca Agreement signed in February 2007 sought to reinstall Palestinian unity. The move was expected by both Fatah and Hamas to break the rejectionism of the Quartet, as it displayed great sacrifices from both parties – especially Hamas.<sup>30</sup> This move was, however, also faced with a continued unenthusiastic response from the Quartet; a move that had great repercussions for the

<sup>24</sup> In July 2006 the EU introduced a Temporary Aid Mechanism (TIM) bypassing the Hamas government which aimed to minimise the impact of aid boycott on civilians.

<sup>25</sup> Yezid Sayigh (2007), "Inducing a Failed State in Palestine".

<sup>26</sup> Associated Press France, "Haniya says attempts to isolate Palestinian government will fail," 14 April 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Yezid Sayigh (2007), "Inducing a Failed State in Palestine", p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Conflicts Forum, "The failure of Palestinian National Unity Government and the Gaza takeover", July 2007.

<sup>29</sup> New York Times, "Europeans agree to send money to Palestine", 20 July 2006.

<sup>30</sup> In fact Hamas, accepted to share its right to govern with its main rival.

credibility of Hamas among its Islamist hardliners as it exposed the movement's flexibility as unfruitful. This definitely soured many Hamas members' confidence in the adopted strategy of compromise and pragmatism vis-à-vis Fatah. Why compromise if nothing is gained?

After weeks of intense infighting, and hundreds of dead, US General Dayton announced Hamas' dependence on Iran and Syria for money and arms.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, in May 2007 Israel allowed the transfer of 500 fresh troops into Gaza, trained under the US, together with 4000 Fatah troops<sup>32</sup> whereafter US officials in Washington promised continued military support to secular Fatah Security Forces (as part of a \$84 million aid package). In concert, on 14 June 2007 these events led to Hamas' declaration of the 'liberation of Gaza' and the completion of the symbolic takeover of the Palestinian Preventive Security Force headquarters in Gaza. The next day Abbas dissolved the National Unity Government and declared a state of emergency. A new emergency government, backed by the US and EU, was installed in the West Bank headquarters at Ramallah led by the technocrat and former World Bank official Salam Fayyad. In less than a week the boycott was lifted (not on the Hamas authority in Gaza) and Israel resumed its contact with the West Bank Authority.

All in all, the process of Western responses to the insertion of Palestinian Islamism into Palestinian electoral politics has been one of continued rejection. Ironically, having been depicted as a terrorist organisation the inclusion of Hamas into Palestinian politics was initially an expression of a process of democratisation of Palestinian politics.<sup>33</sup> Yet, ever since its decision to engage in Palestinian elections, the political party of Hamas has been treated as everything but democratic, a trend that has brought about its failure to perform democratically – a self-fulfilling prophecy. The most apparent and indeed transcending feature has been how little Hamas' wooing of the world through changing its policies has affected the policies of the international community towards it. Absent from the discussions has been Hamas' increased acceptance of a two-state solution around the internationally recognised 1967 lines, in correspondence with the Road Map.<sup>34</sup> In addition there has been a significant decrease in attacks on Israel both from Hamas and from other groups, compared to the conditions during the first and second intifadas: an increase from 35 suicide attacks in 2001, to 53 in 2002, but then a decrease to 26 in 2003 to zero

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/news/u-s-preparing-abbas-guard-to-take-on-hamas-1.203821>

<sup>32</sup> Washington Post, "Fatah Troops enter Gaza with Israeli Assent", 18 May 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Hovdenak, A. "Hamas in Transition: the failure of sanctions", pp. 60–61

<sup>34</sup> Hamas still needs to renounce violence to satisfy the demands of the international community



in 2009–2010.<sup>35</sup> However, the group's reluctance to renounce violence against Israel, its refusal to accept Israel's legitimate existence ( Hamas argues that they need an Israeli demarcation of which borders to recognise Israel within) and its 1988 charter reference to the call for destruction of Israel keeps western governments and, of course, Israel at bay.

For Hamas, already governing without the blessing of the West, being rejected has given the authority *carte blanche* to act detached from any external conditionality except that of Teheran and Damascus. The status quo policy of the Quartet has neither crushed the group nor has it succeeded in bringing Fatah back into the game in Gaza.

<sup>35</sup> Yoram Sweitzer (2010), "The Rise and Fall of Suicide Bombings During the First Intifada", *Strategic Assessment*, vol 13, no. 3. p. 45.

### 3. Hamas' Rule in Gaza: Governing the Ungovernable

Having been deemed 'ungovernable' in 2006<sup>36</sup> one could describe Gaza in 2007 as a 'post-explosion situation'. According to a former European diplomat, in 2008, in the aftermath of Hamas' takeover of Gaza, the main effects of the international sanctions against Haniyeh's Hamas government were clear: Hamas had consolidated its rule in Gaza, increased its military capacity and politics in the coastal enclave had become radicalised to an unprecedented degree.<sup>37</sup> Indeed Hamas has shifted from cooperation to containment in its policies towards other Islamist factions. The *fil rouge* in Hamas' strategy since 2007 has been to maintain its stronghold in Gaza – the last bastion of the movement. Today, struck by political fatigue, the status quo of Hamas is best described as neither upheld through negotiation nor resistance, which is producing tensions and ideological disputes inside Hamas' own ranks.

#### Ruling Gaza

After four years of government Hamas has succeeded in consolidating itself as a political authority in Gaza with a somehow functioning public administration.<sup>38</sup> Under the leadership of Haniyeh the authority has taken over most PA institutions, imposed its own judiciary and three levels of security enforcement divided into: the internal security services (ISS), the police and the so called 'masked patrol' consisting of Hamas members/loyalists carrying out surveillance and arrest orders on individuals either breaking Hamas' penal codes and challenging the public morality rules or demonstrating a lack of willingness to adopt the political methods and positions expressed by Hamas. According to a high-ranking security officer within the PA: "*Where Fatah failed, Hamas succeeded in bringing about a public order and bringing the people security*".<sup>39</sup>

However, in terms of securing political consistency Hamas seems to be failing, as it is seeking to distance itself from violent resistance which is perceived by many

<sup>36</sup> UN emergency relief coordinator Jan Egeland publicly referred to Gaza as a "ticking time bomb", Cited in Mohammed Samhoury, "Gaza Economic Predicament One Year after Disengagement: What Went Wrong?" *Middle East Brief*, no. 12, November 2006, p.1.

<sup>37</sup> Internal document, anonymous European diplomat, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Yezid Sayigh, "Hamas Rule in Gaza: Three Years on", Policy Brief, Brandeis University, March 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, PA security officer, Nablus, May 2011.

Gazans as a legitimate means to an end. Also, it has failed to fulfil its political aspirations of reclaiming Palestinian territory or of finding a political solution which can improve the humanitarian situation with or without violence. In essence, by turning their main strategy from one of conflict resolution to one of conflict management, Hamas has in some sense come to repeat the mistakes made by Fatah in the 1990s. The situation reflects the inbuilt contradictions of governing as a 'normal' political party while struggling for national liberation with neither an accepted army nor sovereign control over territory at their disposal. According to a senior Hamas member of the PLC in the West Bank: *"this is the cost of governing under occupation and the conditions imposed by the international community"*.<sup>40</sup>

The tunnel system, securing the entry/exit of goods, people, ammunition, food and medicine between Egypt and Gaza comprises approximately 400–600 tunnels and employs thousands of Gazans.<sup>41</sup> This has made Hamas less dependent on international support and fuelled a clandestine economy based on smuggling. Local sources explain how everyone benefiting from the tunnels has to pay lip service to Hamas and to provide them with inside information of any kind. This has created a new form of clientelism where Hamas, in collaboration with businessmen who, typically, are clan leaders,<sup>42</sup> has become interwoven into the power structure, creating a class of *nouveau riches* through new, unholy alliances based on politics, money and alternative social bonds. This has, over time, further distorted the transparency of Gazan politics.

For Hamas in the face of the international community's boycott, it has been able to demonstrate self-sufficiency while securing the authority financial income through tax revenues and service fees from the tunnel economy. International NGO's, the Red Cross and the UN have also contributed to support them. While the Gazans wish for the blockade to end, Hamas' defiance in the face of Israeli and US demands has appealed to the Gazan Palestinians' sense of pride, unlike the approach taken by the PA.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Hamas PLC Mahmoud Musleh, Ramallah, May 2011.

<sup>41</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Occupied Palestinian Territories, "Locked in: the Humanitarian Impact of two years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip", Special Focus, August 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Such as the well-known Dughmush and Helles families in Gaza. Telephone interview, local NGO staff, Gaza, May 2011.

The harsh government style is enforced through a heavy-handed security sector, which according to Sayigh has been able to grow without interference from outside donors, though benefiting from training by Sudanese, Syrian and Iranian forces.<sup>43</sup> Under the current conditions this is a risky game, as Hamas is moving closer to authoritarianism as espoused by the PA in the West Bank. Nonetheless, despite the Authority's continued dependence on the PA in regard to the salaries of the civil servants, as a European top diplomat who frequently consults Hamas in Gaza along with many local observers note, Hamas has nevertheless enjoyed a victory that is different from the one of Fatah: that of managing to govern effectively without begging for help from the international community.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, when one Islamist in Nablus was asked about the differences between the Islamist milieu in Gaza and the West Bank he responded by emphasising the common features, leaving little doubt that the Islamists, who are predominantly supporters of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the northern West Bank, are exposed to the same level of oppression and control there as are any potential challengers of Hamas in Gaza.

Indeed Hamas' success at control has led it to replace many individuals in the Administration, predominantly in the security and educational sectors, with Hamas members to ensure the implementation of its political agenda. This has clouded the perception of Hamas as an actor with 'clean hands'. At the end of 2010 only 23% of Palestinians considered the Haniyeh government legitimate, and if new parliamentary elections were held only 25% would vote for Hamas.<sup>45</sup>

### **Oppressive trends – downscaling ideology**

Since 2007 many secular and religious NGOs and grassroots organisations have had their license to operate cancelled or have been denied extensions. With its Gaza takeover Hamas requested all PA-licensed NGO's to reapply for permission to operate, distorting an already-damaged network of political pluralism. According to the local human rights NGO Al-Dameer, in Gaza during 2010, 126 charitable organisations applied for registration: 40 were rejected and 86 approved by the Ministry

<sup>43</sup> Yezid, Sayigh, "Policing the People, Building the State: Authoritarian Transformation in the West Bank and Gaza", Carnegie Middle East Center, February 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Jerusalem, May 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 29 December 2010 <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2010/p38e.html>

of the Interior in Gaza.<sup>46</sup> According to a local NGO working with prisoners and the well-respected ombudsman institution the Independent Human Rights Commission, the most blatant change in Hamas' practical imposition of new legal acts is the re-introduction of the death penalty.<sup>47</sup> The sanction, increasingly implemented by shooting squads or by hanging, is mainly targeting collaborators working together with Israeli intelligence.<sup>48</sup> Such collaborators are often offered huge sums or benefits by Israel in the form of hospital care for family members in Israel or Egypt where better facilities are found compared to the deteriorating healthcare system in Gaza. So far the penalty has not been used against members of groups trying to challenge Hamas' power hold over the Strip.

Hamas still argues that making a distinction between effective government manoeuvring within the confines of civil law and adherence to Islam as a philosophy is realistic and should be maintained, and thus seeks to minimise the risk of compromising either of the two.<sup>49</sup> However, in practice, the leadership is increasingly having to balance competing considerations: opening up to the West and keeping the leftist secular and human rights advocates at bay on the one hand, while on the other seeking to gratify its Islamist challengers. The most important price to pay for this has been the erosion of its popular support. However, according to a leading political analyst,<sup>50</sup> Hamas still just about succeeds in putting national interests first and then their own interests. Ironically the boycott has made them look better than if they had unilaterally refused to engage with the outside world.

Indeed, finding a compromise between ideology and practice has, for Hamas, meant a narrowing down of the space for free political and religious activity. According to international aides in Gaza, this has marginalised political pluralism and caused what Roy terms increased *civic disintegration*.<sup>51</sup> The bond of loyalty between civil society and the ruling power has been broken. Social structures have become

<sup>46</sup> Al-Dameer, 2011, <http://englishweb.aldameer.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/report-associations-program1.pdf> (accessed June 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Officially abolished by the PA in 2002 with the Palestinian Basic Law (before that, between 1994 and 2002, ninety-three people were executed, most of them by military courts). Source: The Independent Commission for Human Rights, "A Legal Baseline Study of the Death Penalty in Palestine", 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Palestinian Independent Human Rights Commission staff, Ramallah, May 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Dr. Mazen Haniyeh, cousin and adviser to Prime Minister Haniyeh, cited in "Radical Islam in Gaza", Crisis Group Middle East Report, no 104, 29 March 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, Arab-Israeli analyst, Haifa, May 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Sara Roy (2011), "Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector", Princeton University Press.

dislocated, both in relation to the grassroots-based Islamic charities (not only those affiliated with Hamas) and to organisational structures dispersing secular messages and, of course, to those related to Fatah.

Seen against the backdrop of this process of civic disintegration, the Hamas strategy seems to have been two-stringed: the authority has sought to come to terms with its Islamic imperatives of integrating an agenda of Islamisation on the ground, while at the same time Hamas has been rationalising its policies by narrowing down the political space to two main concerns: namely internal security and securing inflow of cash through various channels. This has, according to one Hamas dissident, brought about a situation where *“it has become difficult to understand their real opinions”*, as they have become caught up in strategy.<sup>52</sup> In this way the Hamas authority has ended up displaying an ad hoc style of government to fit their needs, or what Sayigh terms the “non-strategy of trial and error”.<sup>53</sup>

With its takeover, much like Fatah, Hamas has become more partisan, replacing support for an imaginary Palestinian state with power politics. This has not only affected the authority’s nationalist agenda, but also widened the gap between its 1988 charter and actual policies such as upholding control and governing effectively – keeping up an appearance of liberating Palestine is virtually impossible. To stay in power Hamas has opted to focus on the former.

### **Hamas’ dilemma: between pragmatism and integrity**

Hamas’ experience of governing has meant two divergent developments: that the Authority Hamas has increased its authoritarianism in terms of its daily political conduct and management of the Strip and, secondly, that the broader movement of Hamas has made shifts away from the maximalist position of its Charter of 1988.<sup>54</sup> A good example of this is the leadership’s shift from clinging to the device of ‘from the river to the sea’<sup>55</sup> as stipulated in the Charter to a declared acceptance of a solution to the conflict along the 1967 armistice line in the wake of their 2006 victory, where Hamas Foreign Minister Zahar in a letter to then UN Secretary General Kofi

<sup>52</sup> Interview, former Hamas member, Jenin, May 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Yezid Sayigh, “Hamas Rule in Gaza: Three Years on”.

<sup>54</sup> Khaled Hroub has documented this well: Hroub (2006), “A’ New Hamas’ through its New Documents”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Referring to all of historic Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.

Annan mentioned the possibility of a two-state solution, with two states living in peace side by side.<sup>56</sup>

Not referred to by its name but as the 'Authority', Hamas today is facing a change in how it is perceived by many Gazans, as the party's transformation into a de facto government has shifted its focus to strict control of internal affairs. This has prompted three uneasy developments: a widening gap between Hamas as a movement and Hamas as the Authority, an increase in the split between the political wing and the military wing of the al-Qassam Brigades, and a geographical split in terms of a more visible disintegration of the relation between Hamas' politburo in Damascus and the more grassroots-based organisational structure in Gaza. As a result, the status quo of Hamas is best described as neither based on negotiation nor on resistance, but rather as maintained through ad hoc governing and a transformation accompanied by confusion in its attempts to please demands which are coming from all directions.

In this way Hamas risks placing all its eggs in one basket by staking its future on its success at governing. Some of its choices have meant increased dependency on Iran and other 'investors', often in the form of rich businessmen earning heavily from the black markets of the tunnel system. With the current (deadlocked) reconciliation agreement with Fatah, the elites in both Gaza and Damascus seek to strike a fine balance by distancing from these regional supporters just enough to aspire to the recognition of western capitals.

Another case in point is Hamas' participation in elections, which has been perceived by both internal and external critics as a breach of its Islamic principles and, at best, a misinterpretation of Islam. Indeed, many have started to doubt whether Hamas' democratic move has brought it closer to international recognition, wondering rather if it has thwarted the democratic nature of the movement. In the face of this critique, Hamas itself has consistently justified their actions by referring to their democratic aspirations as being in accordance with the Islamic concept of *shura* (assembly).<sup>57</sup> But perhaps the most consistent strategy of all has been Hamas'

<sup>56</sup> [http://articles.cnn.com/2006-04-04/world/mideast\\_1\\_qassam-rockets-mahmoud-zahar-hamas-leaders?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2006-04-04/world/mideast_1_qassam-rockets-mahmoud-zahar-hamas-leaders?_s=PM:WORLD)

<sup>57</sup> Since the late 1980s Hamas has been actively advocating for participation in elections, as Sheikh Yassin stated in an interview with a Palestinian daily in 1989. Sheikh Yassin, interview, An-Nahar (Jerusalem), 31 January 1981. Despite its participation in student and professional elections it was, according to the movement, not until the conditions for fair elections were ripe that Hamas engaged in national elections in 2005 for the first time. See Azzam Tamimi (2007), "Hamas: A History from Within", Olive Branch Press, pp. 208–221.

campaign for political power with a good sense of timing. In 2006 most Palestinians favoured a two-state solution but, nevertheless, most still supported Hamas' refusal to recognise (neither accept nor destroy) Israel.<sup>58</sup> Today, five years on, most surveys still point to the same two-stringed tendency.

This development has, in turn, triggered changes within the Islamist milieu. Hamas' experience of government under the conditions described has pushed the movement from being a *guarantor* of the representation of a broad array of Islamist voices and factions into a more antagonistic position vis-à-vis its Islamist brethren inside the Strip. Thus the spheres of dissidence are related to the role of Hamas within Palestinian politics and the grievances and claims of those opposing Hamas need to be explored, starting with the differences between Hamas and its new Islamist challengers.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Shikaki, "Palestinians Support Hamas, but Most Favor Negotiated Peace with Israel", Council on Foreign Relations, 25 September 2006.



## 4. Gaza's New Islamists

### The debate: Palestinian al-Qaeda-ism

Much work and speculation have been taken place over the alleged presence of Al-Qaeda (AQ) in Gaza.<sup>59</sup> The debate over the issue of AQ in Gaza is very fuzzy and marked by constant contradicting accusations. This is especially so as many of the conflict's parties have, for political reasons, an interest in either downplaying or in overexaggerating the phenomenon. Roughly, the issue can be divided into three main strands of argumentation over which the debate takes place: 1) AQ's capitalisation of the Palestinian cause, 2) the actual, formal presence of AQ in Gaza and, 3) the presence of AQ-inspired groups operating as part of a local national struggle. This report will argue for and put emphasis on the prevalence of the latter, i.e. the use of al-Qaeda ideology by new Islamist groups within a national context.

Regarding the first assumption; Palestine has a special status and is the one specific case that has been used and mentioned the most by the AQ global leadership.<sup>60</sup> Al-Qaeda has inserted the Palestinian cause into their larger struggle against the West, demanding the return of Palestine to Islamic sovereignty and thereby seeking an increase in their relevance through the conflict. Palestine is considered part of the Islamic Umma<sup>61</sup> and is perceived as occupied Muslim land, on a par with Iraq and Afghanistan, connecting the near enemy of Israel with the major enemy of the US (and with Arab regimes such as the Egyptian and Jordanian ones). During Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (winter 2008–9) the then deputy of AQ, al-Zawahiri, threatened the US and Israel with revenge on a ten-minute long tape titled "The Massacre in Gaza and the Siege of the Traitors".<sup>62</sup> This has played right back into the strategy of Hamas, who have been reluctant to criticise al-Qaeda and have accepted the premise that both groups are Sunni Muslims struggling to liberate Muslim land, but with different ideas and through different strategies. Recently, in seeking to

<sup>59</sup> Khalid Amayreh, "Hamas and al-Qaeda – the prospects for Radicalization in the Palestinian Occupied Territories", October 2007; Are Hovdenak, "al-Qaeda – A challenge for Hamas?" January 2009, International Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

<sup>60</sup> See Alejandro Beutel and Imad Ad-Dean Ahmad, "Religious or Policy Justification for Violence: A quantitative content analysis of Bin Laden's Statements", CSID.

<sup>61</sup> The worldwide Muslim community of believers.

<sup>62</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=6588084&page=1>

avert a potential feud, Hamas Prime Minister Haniyeh condemned the US killing of Osama Bin-Laden, referring to it as an “assassination and the killing of an Arab holy warrior”, stating: “*We ask God to offer him mercy with the true believers and the martyrs*”.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Hamas has sought to distance itself from al-Qaeda ideology in a move which the Egyptian Brotherhood (of which Hamas is an offspring) argues was not inspired by a desire to win international sympathy, but rather a proof of Hamas’ opposition to AQ ideas.<sup>64</sup> When talking to high-level members of Hamas in the West Bank, the entire notion of al-Qaeda in Gaza is completely rejected. According to PLC member Musleh: “*it is just a very small amount of people using their ideas of jihad to justify violent behaviour*”.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the picture remains fuzzy.

### **Hamas versus al-Qaeda – some differences**

In order to grasp the framework within which the struggle between the al-Qaeda-inspired groups and Hamas takes place it is instructive to look at some fundamental ideological and political differences between al-Qaeda and Hamas. Already in 2006, with the growing talk of al-Qaeda in Palestine, former Israeli intelligence chief Ofer Dekel told a major Israeli daily that “massive differences exist between Hamas and al-Qaeda”, stating that “Hamas believes in a combination of political work and military pressure and it understands the need for regional alliances and for public support”. According to Dekel none of this is true for al-Qaeda.<sup>66</sup>

Broadly speaking, it seems that the *jihadis* oppose the political Islamists because of their exploitation of religion for party political purposes.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, the militants have allegedly gravitated towards the *jihadi* formula, motivated by the uproar in the region (Iraq, Afghanistan and, of course, Palestine and now Libya), rather than by fundamentalist developments within the movement’s ideological manifests and have thus been spurred by external events. Uninterested in politics otherwise, the missionary Salafis have thereby adopted a fundamentalist doctrine.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> [http://www.qassam.ps/news-4486-Hamas\\_condemns\\_killing\\_of\\_Osama\\_Bin\\_Laden.html](http://www.qassam.ps/news-4486-Hamas_condemns_killing_of_Osama_Bin_Laden.html)

<sup>64</sup> Muslim Brotherhood Media interview with anonymous Hamas source in Gaza, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=1002>

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Change and Reform PLC member Mahmoud Musleh, Ramallah, May 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Shabak Chief Ofer Dekel in Yediot Aharonot, 16 March 2006.

<sup>67</sup> International Crisis Group, “Understanding Islamism”, March 2005, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

First and foremost, al-Qaeda sees the whole world as a theatre for *jihad* against all enemies of Islam and not only non-Muslims. Differently, and in a much more specific and restricted way, Hamas confines its violent struggle to its fight against the Israeli occupation, and has never targeted anything outside Palestinian land and Israel proper.<sup>69</sup> In the wake of the terrorist attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin, together with 45 other Islamic/Islamist leaders signed a declaration of condemnation of the acts as “*against all human and Islamic norms*”.<sup>70</sup>

While Hamas has adopted the school of the Harakat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the Sunni ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood), advocating first and foremost changes within Islamic societies infused with the nationalist agenda of resisting Israel through *jihad*, al-Qaeda has, in short, adopted a programme of *jihad*<sup>71</sup> as its sole mode of operation: the militant Salafi ideology. While Hamas advocates gradualism – steady steps towards an Islamic society and state as well as the liberation of Palestine – al-Qaeda rejects this methodology e.g. by dismissing long-term ceasefire (*hudna*) with an enemy along with any participation in parliamentary elections as un-Islamic. In addition Hamas endeavours to build good relations with Arab regimes and governments, while AQ considers this to be cooperation with the *kafir* (infidels). It has called Hamas “Shi’ites in disguise”, referring to the group’s links with Iran.<sup>72</sup>

With the US and Israel on top, Hamas figures further down al-Qaeda’s list of enemies. With its transformation into a political party and especially with its entry into electoral politics it began to appear as a contender to AQ; this partly due to their direct competition over support and due to a range of ideological discrepancies e.g. relating to views on translation of Islamic principles into action and cooperation with regimes such as the Iranians (considered infidel Shi’ites by AQ), the Russians (suppressing the Muslims of Chechnya) and Syrians (of the secular Ba’ath Party ruled by Shi’ite Allawites). As Hovdenak shows, Bin-Laden’s successor al-Zawahiri

<sup>69</sup> Khalid Amayreh (2007), “Hamas and al-Qaida: the Prospects for Radicalization in the Occupied Territories”, *Conflicts Forum*.

<sup>70</sup> Quintan Wictorowicz and John Kaltner (2003), “Killing in the name of Islam: Al-Qaeda’s justifications of September 11”, *Middle East Policy*, vol X, no. 2, pp. 76–77.

<sup>71</sup> Jihad means ‘struggle’ and connotes but is not confined to just war.

<sup>72</sup> Khalid Amayreh (2007), “Hamas and al-Qaida: the Prospects for Radicalization in the Occupied Territories”, p. 5.

has continuously campaigned against Hamas' participation in elections on internet forums and through satellite channels. On one occasion al-Zawahiri commented on an electoral process with Hamas participation by stating, that the vote would not liberate "a grain of Palestinian land, but will choke jihad", accusing Hamas of "abandoning jihad".<sup>73</sup> Yet, no attacks on Israel have been carried out as official al-Qaeda operations. While high on rhetoric, al-Qaeda has continuously been criticised for not being able to make itself more relevant to the Palestinian struggle against Israel and, accordingly, to capitalise more on a 'Muslim cause' which arouses so much frustration and support in the region.

In Gaza the influx of foreign *jihadis* has been relatively low, compared to the case of the neighbouring Palestinian camps in Lebanon where *jihadis* from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan with their agenda of global *jihad* have been able to insert themselves into the political fabric of the camps through their organisation into smaller factions, enjoying support from Hamas and thought by many to be facilitated by Syria.<sup>74, 75</sup> Differently, in Gaza the transnationalist aspects of the Islamist agenda have been remarkably absent. The primary reason for the, until now, low degree of interference might be the Israeli security measures, which leave little practical room for foreign entrenchment of fighters (on the whole, Palestinian militants have left for training courses in places like Iraq, Sudan and Iran). Another explanation might be the PLO's strategy of cracking down on all extraterritorial opposition, while in a Lebanese context the lawlessness and anarchy of the camps vis-à-vis the Lebanese state's exclusion and isolation of Palestinian camp residents has nurtured the *jihadist* trends according to analysts, facilitated by Syria and with the Lebanese government 'turning a blind eye'.<sup>76</sup>

### Areas of dissent: between al-da'wa and jihadism

Because of its maximalist strategies of violence, pan-Islamist revolutionary ethos and potential impact upon military confrontations with Israel, the *Salafi-jihadi* en-

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Are Hovdenak, "al-Qaeda – a challenge for Hamas".

<sup>74</sup> Groups such as Fatah al-Islam (with documented links to al-Qaeda), Jund al-Sham, Usbat al-Ansar and al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida.

<sup>75</sup> Especially in the largest camp of Ain-al-Helweh, where external forces took advantage of the security vacuum that emerged after Israel's invasion in 1982. International Crisis Group, "Nurturing instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps", February 2009.

<sup>76</sup> See Bernard Rougier (2007), "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon", Harvard University Press.

vironment has been given more attention.<sup>77</sup> Though receiving most attention since the Hamas takeover, claims of their existence have been made since 2002.<sup>78</sup>

The phenomenon of new Islamist actors challenging Hamas has developed steadily within the chaos of the inter-Palestinian rift between the secular Fatah and the Islamist Hamas. But also, as a leader of Islamic Jihad in Nablus reflects, the Islamist hardliners have developed their critique of Hamas in parallel and faced with three momentous developments: Hamas' entry into electoral politics, dialogue and compromise with Fatah and the Quartet and internal disagreements over Hamas way of governing in Gaza including its lack of systematised Islamisation and enforcement of *Sharia* as well as its commitment to long term *hudna* with Israel.<sup>79</sup> All points reflecting Western demands.

However, the overriding dynamic is the local context; it is important to understand the changes in the landscape that the *new Islamists* have grown out of. They have emerged from the Gazan social fabric first and foremost in reaction to the absence of a political solution to the 'Palestinian predicament' which has, as described, only intensified under the last four years of Hamas rule. Increasingly, Hamas' combination of political pragmatism with its increased monopolisation of Islam through the taking over of mosque and religious education, has triggered dissent among Islamist hardliners. This tendency lies at the centre of the crossroads facing Hamas in terms of (re)defining its position on armed resistance and its vision for an Islamic society. Interestingly, when dealing with the historiography of the Islamist milieu, the developments of Western policies vis-à-vis Hamas' performance and policy changes has certainly influenced the atomisation of the Islamist milieu.

The increase in Islamist dissent has produced a number of diverging conceptions of loyalty which go beyond the boundaries of any single group or actions. The religio-political orientations seem to reflect either political apathy which materialises in a resignation from the political sphere by many Gazans or they are expressed as a re-inforced violent strategy drawing from more violent, supranational ideologies such

<sup>77</sup> In short referring to the Islamic armed struggle encompassing the struggle against the internal secular enemy and the struggle against occupiers of Muslim land and lastly the global struggle against the West.

<sup>78</sup> After a terrorist attack on Israeli citizens in Kenya in 2002 the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced al-Qaeda's presence in Gaza, "Israel says al-Qaeda active in Gaza", BBC, 5 December, 2002. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2546863.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2546863.stm)

<sup>79</sup> Hamas has consistently accepted *Hudna* and defended this within the confines of their version of Islam.

as the ideological outlet provided by al-Qaeda. These are mirrored in the main line of division between the Hamas challengers: the missionary *Salafi-da'wa*<sup>80</sup> and the more militant *Salafi-jihadis*, leaving between them a grey zone within which politics are negotiated with the ruling Authority.

The former, the da'wa Islamists, emphasise public piety in both unorganised and organised ways through their spreading grassroots work which displays indirect signs of activism. Its members are self-declared to be apolitical and do not as such engage in the Palestinian project of liberation. The *Salafi-jihadis* espouse more violent and militant tactics and have, within recent years, taken up a strategy of inserting themselves into the Palestinian struggle to both represent Islam and fight Israel – Hamas' *raison d'être*.

### 'Rolling thunder': introducing Gaza's new jihadis

Indeed while radicalism can be found at both ends of the religious–secular spectrum, the novelty of the Islamists' agenda lies both in the attempts at incorporating the terminology of global *jihad* into their political aspirations and in their opposition to Hamas. In Gaza particularly, inter-Palestinian fighting usually labelled as part of the already familiar Hamas–Fatah rivalry over power has been confused by a range of new actors with names such as Fatah-Islam, *Jund Ansar Allah* and *Jaysh al-Islam*. This phenomenon is referred to by Hamas as the *Jalajalat*, in a unified reference literally meaning 'rolling thunder', which alludes to a specific Islamic tune '*Nasheed Jaljalat*' used by Hamas followers. Albeit there seems to be some confusion over the term, as the Israeli Security Agency Shabak deals with it as a single movement among many other new Islamist groups.<sup>81</sup>

Currently the phenomenon of the *new* Islamists incorporates Gaza's largest and the four most well known *Salafi-jihadi* groups: *Jund Ansar Allah* (Soldiers of God's Compassion); *Jam'at Jaysh Al-Islam* (The Army of Islam); *At-Tawheed wa Al-Jihad* (Unity and Jihad); and *Jund Allah* (God's Soldiers).<sup>82</sup> These have, in turn, taken the

<sup>80</sup> Being both revivalist and fundamentalist, with the overall aim of preserving Islamic identity and purity, the da'wa Islamists work with conversion missions and strive for public piety. They can be roughly divided into the loosely organised and rather diffuse Salafi configurations (inspired by the Sunni Islamist modernist reformers such as Mohammed Abduh) or the more structured Tablighi clusters, with roots in the Indian *Jama'at al-Da'wa al-Tablighi*, which rose out of the suppression of India's minority of Muslims in the face of a Hindu majority in the 1960's.

<sup>81</sup> See accessible Israeli intelligence reports: [http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/תוריקס%20מימורספור/terror-portal/docs/english/The\\_Jaljalat\\_en.pdf](http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/תוריקס%20מימורספור/terror-portal/docs/english/The_Jaljalat_en.pdf) (accessed June 2011).

<sup>82</sup> Ma'an News, 18 April 2011, <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=277513>

place of other earlier groups such as the Islamic Swords of Righteousness, the Ummah Army and others who have disappeared and joined up with other groups.

The changing groups have carried out military operations against Israeli targets, kidnappings of foreigners, published communiqués and issued political declarations as well as made internal attacks on secular, western-inspired activity such as internet cafes, barbershops serving female customers etc. and, more broadly, they have been engaged in attempts to redirect the religious activity of Gaza's mosques towards more *Salafi-jihadi* trends. In the winter of 2007, after Hamas' takeover, the groups initiated a strong campaign against immoral un-Islamic symbols in Gaza. The now dissolved Sayf al-Haqq (The Islamic Swords of Righteousness) claimed responsibility for numerous attacks on internet cafes and video shops.<sup>83</sup>

In short, the new Islamist groups are claiming ownership over the armed struggle, seeking to replace Hamas as the symbol of resistance. But perhaps even more than this, they are an expression of resistance against any form of political authority and those who are "*selling their soul and integrity to the slavery of the US and Europe*", as one *Salafi-jihadi* interviewed in the most northern part of the West Bank stated.<sup>84</sup> The ideological aspirations of the groups are not, as such, new, but the dissolving of the alliance with Hamas has placed them in opposition. In the event of Israeli attacks Hamas would also now be more hesitant to protect them.

The violent *jihadis* have received the most attention from both Hamas and the foreign media. In practice the quantitative extent of the phenomenon is not known; their numbers and influence are a matter of disagreement, partly because of limited access for researchers and reporters due to Hamas' restrictions and partly due to the clandestine nature of their organisation. While Hamas claims they are less than 100, the groups themselves claim their numbers to be in the hundreds, while US sources even go as far as to say thousands.<sup>85</sup> The groups are perceived as being highly unstructured, not organised into any overarching structure and even operating under changing names and functioning more as *ad hoc* organisations.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/muslim-vice-squad-suspected-in-gaza-internet-cafe-music-shop-bombings-1.214888>

<sup>84</sup> Interview, anonymous Islamist, Tulkarm, May 2011.

<sup>85</sup> "Radical Islam in Gaza," Crisis Group Middle East Report, no. 104, 29 March 2011.

<sup>86</sup> Are Hovdenak, "al-Qaeda – a challenge for Hamas".



According to most experts the grouping of *Salafi-jihadis* under one umbrella does not yet pose a real threat to either Hamas or Fatah. However, for several reasons they should not be ignored: because of the ideological challenge they pose to Hamas and the broader scheme of Palestinian politics,<sup>87</sup> because of the risk of an internal jihadi network reaching into Gaza, because of the role they might have in the international perception of Palestinian politics and because of the reactions any attack on Israel from Gaza could trigger. Lastly, the latent long-term ideological struggle within the milieu has the capacity to alter the internal public morality and modes of organisation if it succeeds in rooting itself within public opinion. These issues might, all together, have consequences for the social cohesion of Gazan society and the possibility of a reconciliation and harmonisation with the West Bank. In fact the May 2011 reconciliation agreement and the prevailing move of Hamas to loosen their conception of resistance towards more non-violent means have the potential to only consolidate their opposition.

The *Salafi-jihadis* employ various methods to counter Hamas and get their aspirations onto the political agenda. These methods are, in sum: 1) military operations against Israeli and internal targets to expose Hamas' lack of control and display their own commitment to violent resistance; 2) communications of their politico-religious agenda through communiqués and pamphlets on the internet and on the ground to the Gazan public; and 3) through more symbolic operations such as kidnappings and religious sermons to spread their message, to prove their influence and discomfort Hamas.

When examining the recruitment base of the new hardliners the connection of the militants to the Gazan socio-political fabric is evident: a major part of the new recruits are either dissenters from Hamas' military wing al-Qassam or other military wings of other established groups. Other recruits are individual Hamas members enjoying double membership of both Hamas/al-Qassam and the smaller factions. This allows the members to both conduct a 'normal' life within the Hamas political structure and to use their second membership of the smaller groups as an outlet for their intensified critique of Hamas' compromising on violent resistance and implementation of Islamic law. Indeed, the threat they pose lies in the ideological appeal they have for, especially, low ranking cadres aspiring to more prestigious titles and positions within an organisational structure which rewards and recognises their ef-

<sup>87</sup> "Radical Islam in Gaza", Crisis Group Middle East Report.



forts. Moreover, as we shall see, the groups can be linked to clans and economic interests competing with Hamas over scarce resources and symbolic power. In the current absence of a much-needed public sector social safety net and with economic foundations that discourage any social contract between Authority and State, Palestinians have increasingly adopted survival strategies involving returning to traditional kinship networks.<sup>88</sup> Importantly, after Hamas' coming into power in 2006 the alliance between Hamas and Gaza's clans ended. The once overlapping interests stemming from being non-governmental entities seeking to prevent the Authority's intrusion into their internal affairs were disrupted. This was despite the fact that they both follow more conservative social codes than those presented by Fatah. After confrontation with Fatah in 2007 and the take-over of Gaza, representatives of Haniyeh explicitly warned families in Gaza not to defy the government, displaying an awareness of a potential conflict of interests.<sup>89</sup>

### **An Islamic Emirate in Gaza?**

*Jund Ansar-Allah* (Soldiers of God's Compassion) is one of the major, most consistent groups operating, targeting internal as well as external goals. In order to demonstrate their opposition to any settled agreement or acceptance of the 'Zionists' they have been eager to break the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel agreed after Cast Lead. In 2008 *Jund Ansar Allah* attacked the Nahal Oz border crossing into Israel. The attempt was made by a group of militants on horseback. However, it was repelled by the Israeli Defence Forces. Later, the group was also thought to be behind the armed raid on a wedding of a relative of former Fatah Security Chief Mahmoud Dahlan.<sup>90</sup> This caused a day long stand-off between the fighters and Hamas in the southern towns of Khan Yunis and Rafah, which was eventually resolved through mediation by Islamic scholars. This led the group to distribute pamphlets to Gaza residents criticising Hamas and calling for the implementation of *sharia* and *hudud*, which within the *Sharia* refers to punishments reserved for special crimes considered "claims of God".<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> International Crisis Group, (2007) "Inside Gaza: The challenge of Clans and Families.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. pp. 13–14.

<sup>90</sup> Dahlan is suspected to be behind the US backed Fatah offensive against Hamas. "The Gaza Bombshell", April 2000, Vanity Fair <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804> (accessed June 2011).

<sup>91</sup> It includes whipping unmarried fornicators, stoning adulterers and amputating the hands of thieves, International Crisis Group (2011), "Radical Islam in Gaza", p. 12.

The intensification of the inter-Islamic rifts culminated when, in August 2009, in the Ibn Tamiyyah Mosque at Rafah, leader of the group Mufti Abdel-Latif Moussa (also known as Abu al-Nour al-Maqdissi) declared Gaza an Islamic Emirate.<sup>92</sup> Under the title 'Golden Advice to Ismail Haniyeh's Government', Moussa delivered a harsh critique of Hamas directed against its secular style of governance and its failure to resist the Israeli occupation. This pushed Hamas to its limit, and the Authority needed both to demonstrate its capacity to uphold control and to avoid the spread of ideological incitement to the broader public. Hamas responded heavily by opening fire killing 24 including Moussa and eleven members of the group and six members of Hamas forces.<sup>93</sup> This re-sparked fierce debate over the possible influence of al-Qaeda interests in the Strip, which exposed Hamas, as Prime Minister Haniyeh had just been outspoken in denying allegations of any AQ presence in the strip.

Another group believed still to be operating is *Jaysh Al-Islam*. Initially an ally of Hamas it is now a part of the Islamist opposition to the Authority. The group is primarily known for its kidnapping of Gilad Shalit (still in captivity, just entering his fifth year). It has several times stated that it is not a part of al-Qaeda but has expressed its sympathy towards its *jihadi* ideas and is allegedly obsessed with al-Zarqawi, the deceased leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The group is led by a former security chief and well-known clan leader, Mumtaz Dugmush, known for his shifting allegiances. Having been a sub-contractor of both Hamas and Fatah military operations, since 2006 the leader and his followers have operated autonomously under the name *Jaysh Al-Islam*. They operated together with Hamas for the first time on Shalit's kidnapping. For unknown reasons Dugmush stopped his cooperation with Hamas, denounced the Saudi-facilitated Mecca Unity agreement and soon after the group single-handedly kidnapped two Fox TV journalists for two weeks. The group demanded the release of Muslim prisoners from American prisons. After Hamas' takeover in 2007 the group kidnapped BBC journalist Alan Johnston in March, likewise requiring the release of al-Qaeda affiliated Palestinian-Jordanian cleric, Abu Qatada al-Filastini whose Hamburg apartment had been rented by Muhammad Atta, one of the 11 September 2001 hijackers.<sup>94</sup> After four months of captivity and several violent clashes between the group and Hamas, Johnston was released as a result of intense

<sup>92</sup> The southernmost city of Gaza bordering Egypt.

<sup>93</sup> Ma'an News 17 August 2009 <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=219368> (accessed May 2011).

<sup>94</sup> <http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=42425>

efforts on the part of Hamas. As exiled leader Meshal noted at the time of Johnston's release, this was proof of Hamas "*bringing order to Gaza*".<sup>95</sup> At the end of 2010, a joint intelligence cooperation between Israel and Egypt led to the assassination of one senior Jaysh al-Islam militant in Gaza, Mohammad Namnan, accused of allegedly planning an attack on US forces stationed in the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>96</sup>

In April 2011 the Italian activist and blogger Vittorio Arrigoni was kidnapped and hanged by a small group of *jihadis* belonging to the small outfit *Jahafil Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad fi Filastin* (The Armies of Monotheism and Jihad in Palestine). The militants demanded that their leader be released from a Hamas prison and, when denied, they responded by exposing their role as a hardliner in Gazan politics.<sup>97</sup> According to the Israeli *jihad* watch MEMRI, the establishment of the group was announced in November 2008 through communiqués vowing loyalty to al-Qaeda after having received messages from Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri.<sup>98</sup>

Just as the killers intended, the Hamas Authority was humiliated on a global scale by their inability to prevent the killing.

In July 2011 the group sent out an announcement of the martyrdom of two of its fighters killed by Israeli forces during a military operation. The group declared its continued commitment to the fight against Hamas, the Jewish settlers, the secular, democracy and praised Al-Maqqdissi for his efforts in the Ibn Tamiyyah Mosque. The pictures of the dead bodies of the fighters bore the hallmark of AQ, attesting to the group's desire to adhere to its transnational Sunni Islamist alliance.<sup>99</sup>

While alike in nature, the impacts of the events display a radical shift towards atomisation: the Shalit kidnapping was facilitated by Hamas, whereas the later captures have taken place after or during Hamas' takeover and thus have been a part of the internal struggle between the Hamas Authority and its challengers. This shift is highly emblematic of the hardening of the fronts within the Islamist milieu after Hamas' entry into power. With Hamas being in power it has gone from ally to enemy, threatening the economic, political and cultural interests of non-governmental actors.

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/news/meshal-johnston-s-release-shows-hamas-brought-order-to-gaza-1.224758>

<sup>96</sup> According to reports by Time World this revealed a surprisingly high level of coordination between Israel and Egypt: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2030671,00.html>

<sup>97</sup> <http://www.corriere.it/International/english/articoli/2011/04/15/pacificist-Arrigoni-slain-Gaza.shtml>

<sup>98</sup> [http://www.memrijtm.org/content/en/blog\\_personal.htm?id=466&param=GJN](http://www.memrijtm.org/content/en/blog_personal.htm?id=466&param=GJN)

<sup>99</sup> SITE Intel Group, Tawhid and Jihad Group Announces Death of Two Fighters, 7 June 2011.

## **New Shi'a presence in Gaza – exporting the Iranian model?**

According to a local journalist in Gaza, a smaller but highly particular trend has surfaced: Palestinian Islamists converting to Shi'ite Islam and starting to reorient towards the Hezbollah.<sup>100</sup> The group is, in parallel with Hamas, both a Lebanese party and a resistance group (designated a terrorist group by the EU and the US) with whom the Brotherhood including Hamas has had varying relationships: in regard to Israel they share a common enemy, but they compete in terms of religious foundations of their ideologies and public support. Allegedly the connection has its roots back in Israel's expelling of some 400 suspected pro-Islamist sympathisers to South Lebanon in 1992 in an attempt to topple the resistance, but which instead led to the forming of crucial bonds between Lebanese and Palestinian Islamists. Almost 20 years later the link has been revived and inspired newcomers.

In the spring of 2011, with the release of a group of Hezbollah members in Egypt following the rupture of Mubarak's prisons, there was an inflow of Hezbollah militants into Gaza. Allegedly these were connected primarily to Islamic Jihad members already benefitting greatly from their great protégé Iran (a role Hamas has refused to take on). In the north of Gaza, Shi'a representatives have established the association 'Forum Shakaki'.<sup>101</sup> Although these some 200 estimated converts from Sunni to Shi'a for the moment enjoy very little influence on the political scene in Gaza they have indeed come to represent one visible aspect of the influx of foreign interest in Gaza.

What is more, the support stems from an admiration of Hezbollah's guerrilla warfare and non-compromised opposition to Israel combined with their successful inclusion into the Lebanese parliamentary system.<sup>102</sup> This is only reinforced by the admiration of Hezbollah's actions during the 2006 war with Israel and Nasrallah's iconic status.<sup>103</sup>

The Shi'a ideology drawing on the central Shi'ite figure of martyr Husain as a principled revolutionary has become attractive in the context of the betrayed Palestinian revolution – the Achilles' heel of Hamas. The group has, in the eyes of its Islamist

<sup>100</sup> Telephone interview, Associated Press France, Mai Yagh, Gaza, May 2011. See also: <http://sh22y.com/vb/t155233.html?language=en>

<sup>101</sup> Associated Press France, فلسطينيون يعتنقون المذهب الشيعي في غزة معقل حركة حماس السنني تحقيق , 1 April 2011.

<sup>102</sup> See among others Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), "Hizbu'llah Politics and Religion", Pluto Press.

<sup>103</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/5205246.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5205246.stm)

critics, failed to turn Gaza into an Islamic state. Roughly speaking, the vision of this *jihadi* strand is to install an Iranian model personified in the shape of the Khomeini Shi'a revolutionary in Gaza. This stands in contrast to some Hamas members' ambition of implementing a Turkish model in Gaza under the slogan "Erdogan not Taliban".<sup>104</sup>

Though presumably small and mostly symbolic, the extent and depth of this propensity is difficult to estimate. However, Hamas is restricted from completely crushing the Shi'a associations, as this might jeopardise their support from Iran. What remains crucial is the decision of once Sunni Islamists to take up Shi'a ideals in the realisation that the main political authority to represent Sunni Islam has failed to fulfil the revolutionary ethos. This adds another aspect to the ideological challenges facing Hamas.

### **Withdrawal from the political sphere: educating and agitating for public piety**

The increased role of Islamist vocabulary in the Gazan streets has to be seen against the backdrop of a much more general tendency for people to develop their private Islam in concert with the increased inward turning of religious aspirations as the PA throughout the 1990s left very little outlet for religio-cultural activity.<sup>105</sup>

The *da'wa* traditions can be categorised under one ideal-type of Palestinian Islamism which Lybarger terms "*the struggle for the soul*" (*al-Jihad fi sabil al nafs*).<sup>106</sup> This emerging conception of the collective struggle to preserve ideological integrity through withdrawal, in Islamic terms *bay'a*, provides the right to withdraw from public political life in the case of a corrupt ruler.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, extraction from the dirty game of power politics and militant activism – and rather a turning inwards and internal effort to live a pious life – is a core feature of the Islamist milieu.

<sup>104</sup> Two central advisors of Prime Minister Haniyeh, Ahmad Yousef and Ghazi Hamad, have several times stated the model of Turkey to be the vision for Hamas, directly opposing the visions of Iran and al-Qaeda. See Thanassis Cambanis, "Letters from Gaza: Hamas the opportunist", in *Foreign Affairs* 18, June 2010; Yezid Sayigh, "Hamas Rule in Gaza: Three Years On", Policy Brief, Brandeis University, March 2010, p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> These tendencies have to be seen in tandem with a major shift in restrictions on Palestinians' movement and, more specifically, their now denied access to the Israeli labour market, a major source of income for the large unskilled labour force in the Strip.

<sup>106</sup> Loren D. Lybarger, "Identity and Religion in Palestine", 2007, Princeton University Press, pp. 103–105.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p. 103.

The *Salafi da'was* are not organised in large networks either, but connected to specific mosques and sheiks, which focus on Islamic education. As an Islamic scholar at the Islamic university of an-Najah in the northern West Bank city of Nablus notes, the centres for Islamic studies in both Nablus and the Islamic University in Gaza have turned into educational centres for *da'wa* sheiks. Most of them benefit from contacts with transnational networks and have received their teachings from *ulamas* (Islamic legal scholars), returning from religious education in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 80s. As one missionary Salafi in Jerusalem expresses it: "*We are preparing Palestinian society for statehood*".<sup>108</sup> In their teaching and preaching they espouse little or no critique of Israel and provide little platform for concrete measures against occupational structures.

The tendency of a leaning towards *da'wa* activism in all its shapes is attention grabbing, as it seems to represent the epitome of political apathy and fatigue with the occupation as well as the internal decay of Palestinian society symbolised by the number of nightclubs, casinos and foreign satellite TV stations showing soap operas and sitcoms.

Signs of increased public piety such as veiled women and a decrease in the consumption of alcohol and intensification of the life around mosques are often wrongly and one-dimensionally interpreted as signs of top-down Islamisation ordered by Islamic authorities. Indeed, historically, as Roy shows, the Islamist sector in Gaza has been able to inspire high levels of voluntarism as it is deemed to be responsive to increased needs for purpose, trust and solidarity.<sup>109</sup> Indeed much bottom-up social engagement in Gazan civil society happens through the Islamist networks and as individual quests for cultural identity in the context of a fragmented social order.<sup>110</sup> The *da'wa* category also needs to be understood as including the individuals, especially women who, as Deeb describes in her account of Shiite women in Lebanon, are turning towards piety as a form of Islamic activism.<sup>111</sup> Other signs of engagement in this form of Islamic activism are women's engagement in grassroots based work.<sup>112</sup> This includes, among other symbols, wearing the veil as a marker for assert-

<sup>108</sup> Interview, Islamic scholar and imam, Jerusalem, May 2011.

<sup>109</sup> Sara Roy (2011), " Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector", Princeton University Press, p.5

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. p. 51

<sup>111</sup> Lara Deeb (2006), "An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Sh'i Lebanon", Princeton University Press.

<sup>112</sup> For an account of women's Islamic activism sees Eileen Kuttub (2006), "The Paradox of Women's Work: Coping, Crisis and Family Survival", in *Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance and Mobility under Occupation*, Lisa Taraki (ed.), Syracuse University Press.

ing one's adherence to Islam. Conversely, it is also the case that groups place pressure upon women, especially secular women, to adopt the veil (hitherto, this has not been so forcibly the case).

### **Non-violent Islamists as political instruments**

In terms of the struggle for political power, the issue of the *Salafi da'was* is interesting, as their prevalence has been used as an instrument by Fatah to counter Hamas, particularly in the West Bank but also in Gaza. According to an advisor to the minister of Islamic Waqf<sup>113</sup> in Ramallah, before the 2007 takeover the PA paid for and installed *Salafi da'wa* sheiks in most West Bank mosques to keep Hamas out (former Hamas member Mahmoud al-Habbash).<sup>114</sup> The authorities in both territories are performing an impressive micro-management of mosque activities. There have been many reports of Hamas sheiks being relocated to mosques far from their homes, making it impossible for them to fulfil their duties. Just as is the case with Hamas' strategy of controlling mosques and Friday Prayers, the PA in the West Bank are also sending out weekly headlines to the mosques in order to implement their political agenda.

### **Hizb ut-Tahrir: pacifist but aggressive**

One organisation that is distinctly different from other *da'wa* trends is the non-violent organisation *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation). Originally founded in Jerusalem in 1953, over the last years the movement has gained increased momentum in Palestine.<sup>115</sup> The group is not missionary but more an agitator, sparking or engaging in debates over political issues. Its well-designed webpage in both English and Arabic provides in-depth analysis of both Israeli and Palestinian politics, as well as the US/EU's role. It calls for Muslim unity to fight Israel. In one place it states, "*It is high time the sleeping giant awoke and roared to topple the colonialist Kafir and kicked its cronies out of the Muslims' lands*".<sup>116</sup>

The organisation has ceased formulating a harsh critique of the political dispositions of the political authorities, presented in a Pan-Islamic terminology. As one

<sup>113</sup> Religious endowments.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with advisor to minister of Waqf former Hamas member Mahmoud al-Habbash.

<sup>115</sup> The party is a small and elitist offspring of The Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>116</sup> Hizb ut Tahrir, "The 'American' pressure on Israel", 2010. <http://english.hizbuttahrir.org/index.php/middle-east/political-comments/266-the-american-pressure-on-qisraelq>



Islamist in the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Beit Hanina states, they have become influential because they are extremely ‘talkative.’<sup>117</sup> The organisation concentrates on political change, criticising Arab leaders and foreign occupation of Muslim land without espousing strategies of violence. Despite frequent arrests by both Hamas and the PA in the West Bank during demonstrations, it is difficult for any political authority to jail their members in the long term, as they are not military.<sup>118</sup> With the newest Hamas–Fatah reconciliation agreement, the organisation approached Hamas in Gaza with a formal statement opposing the agreement and Hamas’ compromise with the secular PLO, recalling their commitment to the liberation of historic Palestine under the banner of “from the river to the sea.”<sup>119</sup> To assert their strong hold over the strip, in the beginning of July 2011 Hamas banned their annual rally commemorating the fall of the caliphate regime.<sup>120</sup>

Largely, the members tend to come from the intellectual and professional classes,<sup>121</sup> as opposed to the many so-called *fellabin* (peasants) and poor camp dwellers who today form the enormous group of semiskilled and unskilled labour making up the large part of Hamas’ support base. Though the number of supporters of the party is difficult to estimate, they remain marginal but succeed in setting the agenda with pamphlets and declarative statements and also through their impressive global network throughout more than 40 countries.<sup>122</sup>

However, as Lybarger’s ethnographic work documents, the grievances espoused by their supporters reveal the same patterns of political apathy with the political authorities, lack of trust in any politically negotiated solution with Israel and indignation at the influx of Western interference in Muslim politics and the erosion of principles within Palestinian society.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, the group has capitalised on the Fatah–Hamas rift and the failure of the political authorities to deliver in the struggle against the occupation. At the same time, in the face of their repression, the group

<sup>117</sup> Interview, Beit Hanina, May 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Interview, Hamas official, Jerusalem, May 2011(a)

<sup>119</sup> <http://www.khilafah.com/index.php/analysis/middle-east/11837-hizb-ut-tahrir-gives-sincere-advice-to-hamas-in-relation-to-the-political-agreement-with-the-authority-of-ramallah>

<sup>120</sup> Palestinian news and info agency, <http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&cid=16599> (accessed June 2011)

<sup>121</sup> Milton-Edwards (1996), “Islamic Politics in Palestine”, London, Tauris Academic Studies, pp. 64–72.

<sup>122</sup> Haji-Farouki (2000), “Islamists and the threat of Jihad: Hizb al-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun on Israel and the Jews”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 21–46.

<sup>123</sup> Loren D. Lybarger (2007), “Identity and Religion in Palestine”, pp.94–95.



enjoy increased support and risk less than the overt militants who are more likely to be crushed either by Hamas or the Israel Defense Forces.

### **A politicised puzzle**

In terms of the actual formalisation of a link between al-Qaeda and the new variants of Palestinian Islamism, the issue has become extremely politicised within the broader scheme of the conflict. Many of the *Salafi-jihadis* do not explicitly draw from al-Qaeda concepts to explain or justify their activities and aspirations,<sup>124</sup> and many interviewees representing the groups in question deny formal links with AQ.

However, the inspirational link is more obvious. According to the leader of the *Jund Ansar Allah* group, Abu al-Haret, the groups “do not have local religious scholars who advise them in Gaza”; rather they seek inspiration from outside thinkers and scholars with experience from other battlefronts and ideological sources of inspiration. Among the movement’s most influential sheiks abroad, the Gaza *jihadis* name the Nablus born Palestinian Abu Mohammad Al-Maqdissi<sup>125</sup> who was the spiritual mentor of al-Qaeda’s initial leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (killed in 2006), and the fatwas – or religious decrees – issued by the 14th century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah and his pupil Ibn Al-Qaim, as well as other Islamist scholars.<sup>126</sup>

In Israel there has been interest in aligning the struggle against Palestinian Islamism with the wider war against al-Qaeda’s terrorism.<sup>127</sup> Israel has repeatedly connected attacks on Israel by smaller militias to an increased al-Qaeda presence in Gaza,<sup>128</sup> which has been continuously rejected by Hamas. The movement sees it as an Israeli pretext for another war and accuses Israel of media campaigning and spreading rumours about the incubation of al-Qaeda like groups.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>124</sup> “Radical Islam in Gaza”, Crisis Group Middle East Report, No 104, 29 March 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Considered a main Islamist thinker inspired by both Ibn Tamiyyah and the Salafi revivalist thinking of the Saudi al-Wahhab. Maqdissi has been based in Afghanistan, Pakistan and is now residing in Jordan, though he defies the regime and advocates for its overthrow. He has been imprisoned in Jordan but now lives in the Amman suburb of Zarqa centred around the mosque of Beit al-Imam.

<sup>126</sup> Ma’an News Agency, Ibrahim Qannan, “New Gaza Salafist Faction Numbers 11,000”, 19 April 2010. See <http://inteltrends.wordpress.com/page/65/>

<sup>127</sup> Hovdenak (2009), “al-Qaeda – a challenge for Hamas”.

<sup>128</sup> Yuval Diskin, Chief of Israeli security agency, “Shin Beit Chief: al-Qaeda affiliated groups behind Gaza violence”, Associated Press, 19 January 2011.

<sup>129</sup> “Radical Islam in Gaza”, Crisis Group Middle East Report, p. 2.

Moreover, ever since they lost their foothold in Gaza in 2007 the Fatah dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has been interested in demonising Hamas' rule and, more broadly, any form of Palestinian Islamism which might expose an inability to satisfy their constituencies. Before the Hamas victory in 2006 Abbas was fast to reject any allegation of al-Qaeda presence. However after Hamas' victory the President reversed course and accused Hamas of being allies of al-Qaeda.<sup>130</sup> This was subsequently supported by then Egyptian president Mubarak, who claimed that the same tendency was behind attacks on Egyptian targets, referring particularly to the group *Jaysh al-Islam* (Army of Islam).<sup>131</sup> In this way the notion of al-Qaeda presence has already been used as part of the internal power struggles, with little focus on the substance of the claims and their potential political repercussions.

However, there is little doubt that there is a relation between AQ's use of the Palestine question and local groups' use of the network's rhetoric and ideology. Accordingly, when exploring the specific context of the outgrowth of al-Qaeda inspired groups it seems that they are very much a component of the socio-political fabric of Gaza, demonstrating frustration with both Hamas and Fatah and their way of dealing with the principal enemy Israel and the role of Islam on a very concrete level. The groups espouse national or local grievances, mostly directed at the ruling Authority. For that purpose, as one interlocutor notes, the philosophy of al-Qaeda is useful.<sup>132</sup> Despite the strong inspirational source and the reservoir of grievances provided by the ideology of al-Qaeda, there is little tangible evidence that al-Qaeda has formalised its presence in the small enclave, despite the aspirations of some groups to be part of the al-Qaeda network. This leads Hovdenak to conclude that the al-Qaeda in Gaza complex is "more rhetoric than action".<sup>133</sup> The present examination points to the same conclusion. This corresponds well with the reaction of many Palestinian Islamists and experts interviewed about this issue. When asked about actual al-Qaeda presence most interlocutors expressed amusement and stated that, most likely, the radical Islamists entering the arena were marginalised local Islamists pursuing new ideological frameworks and trends to be a part of, as result of their 'divorce from Hamas'.

<sup>130</sup> "Al-Qaeda has infiltrated Gaza with the help of Hamas, says Abbas", the Sunday Times, 28 February 2008.

<sup>131</sup> "Egypt says Gaza militants were behind New Year's church bomb", The Wall Street Journal, 24 January 2011.

<sup>132</sup> Interview, Islamist scholar, An-Najah University, Nablus, May 2011.

<sup>133</sup> Are Hovdenak, "al-Qaeda – a challenge for Hamas".

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion the main areas of contention within the Islamist milieu can be seen through a three-way analytical prism: 1) the international isolation of Hamas 2) the consequences of Hamas' shift from movement to political authority and 3) the struggle to represent resistance and Islam and *new* transnational trends infusing the Islamists' atomised agenda. These have, in turn, bolstered the Islamist milieu in Gaza, but have also antagonised the milieu from within and motivated a cluster of new Islamist groups to emerge, espousing a new, more radical, agenda and strategies of violence.

Within a regional context the case of Palestinian Islamism differs significantly from its regional variants as it happens as part of a national liberation struggle in search of unaccomplished statehood. Hamas' style of governance, pragmatic considerations and strategic moves towards reconciliation and cooperation have contributed to pockets of frustration among Islamist hardliners. The recently formed new Islamist groups have emerged to challenge the political authority. This has happened in the context of a long-term process of social fragmentation taking new forms under isolation from the outside world and mixed with new forms of clientelism emanating from the clandestine tunnel economy of Hamas in Gaza, albeit loosely organised and constantly changing.

In Gaza the legitimacy of Hamas' monopoly over 'representing Islam' is being questioned; groups are seeking to replace Hamas' violent resistance, to impose an Islamist agenda encouraging the emergence of a localisation of politics and *sharia* based reconciliation. However this happens in various ways; the process of atomisation of Palestinian Islamist politics is far from unidirectional and homogenous. One common denominator is the groups' references to transnational al-Qaeda ideas, but these generally remain tightly knit to the Palestinian context. In addition the atomisation of the Islamist milieu has to be seen against the backdrop of Israel's long-running war against Gaza's militants and, since 2001, its alliance with the US-led 'war on terror'. The punishment of Hamas by the international community, Hamas' strategic moderation and its failed project of liberation have soured with many supporters and the strategy Hamas has taken has not succeeded in cracking down on the dissident Islamists.

The phenomenon of the *new Islamists* is multi-directional and plays into the broader scheme of the conflict. In conclusion, the experience of being governed by both Fatah and Hamas and the resulting politics of religious dissent reveals the fact that the lines of division between radical and non-radical cannot be drawn along the division between secular and religious. It must be made on a case-by-case basis, focusing on more concrete issues such as: violent resistance, ceasefire and *hudna*, electoral politics, global and regional trends and inter-Palestinian cooperation.

In this way it seems that the core strength of the *jihadis* lies in the overlap between their ideological grievances, aspirations for private success and organised groups' ambitions of inserting themselves into the power struggle between Authority and challengers. Old kinship networks are revitalised and transformed into new Islamist groups fed by AQ propaganda. However, when exploring the concrete actions of the groups it becomes clear that their activities remain limited, and despite most rhetorical messages, largely territorially connected to the larger Palestinian national project.

The *new Islamists* draw on ideas of global jihad inspired by al-Qaeda which they insert into their political activism and military operations against Israel and against internal targets inside Gaza. The groups remain bound to the local context and do not represent an actual al-Qaeda presence in Gaza. In practice the groups pose only a minor military challenge to Hamas, but any armed confrontation with Israel could trigger new major clashes which the uncertain security situation on the Sinai Peninsula could help reinforce. Just as importantly, the ideological grievances towards the established governmental structures of Hamas pose a real threat to the movement's own internal consistency and public support. Hamas' political horizons are increasingly being narrowed down.