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Hamas and the Islamic State Organization: Toward a Head-On Collision in the Gaza Strip?

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Recent weeks have seen an escalation in the conflict in the Gaza Strip between Hamas and the Salafi jihad groups that support the Islamic State organization. Incidents included small arms fire, bombs planted in public buildings, and rocket fire, both in cities in the Gaza Strip and toward Israel. The struggle between Islamic State supporters and Palestinians in the al-Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, including Hamas operatives, was also evidence of the growing tension between the two sides. Against this background, Hamas security forces in the Gaza Strip arrested dozens of Salafi operatives, and even destroyed a Salafi mosque in Deir al-Balah. In response to the arrests, spokesmen on behalf of Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya issued an ultimatum, saying that unless those arrested were freed within 72 hours, the group would launch an all-out war against Hamas on all fronts. These threats have not yet been realized.

The tension between Hamas and the organizations espousing and promoting the Salafi jihad stream in the Gaza Strip — and recognizing its authority — is not new. The ideological gaps regarding the way of life in the Gaza Strip between pragmatic Hamas, which is part of the Muslim Brotherhood stream, and the organizations adhering to Salafi jihad beliefs, which require that Islamic religious law (*sharia*) be imposed unequivocally on civilians in the Gaza Strip, even by force, have already led to sharp disputes and even violent conflict between the two camps. A particularly severe expression of this tension occurred in August 2009 in a mosque in the Gaza Strip presided over by Sheikh Abdel Latif Moussa, the leader of the Jund Ansar Allah organization. Abdel Latif declared the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the Gaza Strip, thereby directly challenging the Hamas government's hegemony, and also attempted to unite all the Salafi groups in Gaza in a single organization. In response to what it perceived as insurrection against its rule, a Hamas military force killed the sheikh and some 20 of his followers. Since then, both sides have taken care to maintain a tense coexistence that has seen ups and downs, based primarily on caution by the Salafi jihad against overly provoking Hamas.

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The announcement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi last year on the establishment of the Islamic State and his appointment as caliph prompted a number of Salafi-jihad organizations in the Gaza Strip to declare their support for the organization. Some also swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi. These factions included Majlis Shura Mujahidin, Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya, Ansar al-Sharia Bayt al-Maqdis, al Nusra al Maqdisi, and al-Dawla al-Islamiya. At the same time, until now this common purpose among these organizations has not enabled them to unite under one umbrella organization, win the support of the Islamic State, and become part of the self-described caliphate, as happened to organizations such as Wilayat Sinai (led by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis) and Wilayat West Africa (led by Boko Haram). Reasons for this failure include the factionalism and sectarianism typical of the organizations operating in the Gaza Strip; the inability of the organizations to establish an autonomous region ruled by *sharia* based on their interpretation of the law and the way they believe an Islamic state should be run; and their ineffectiveness in fighting against Hamas or Israel.

In general, Palestinian religious nationalism as an issue in and of itself is rejected by the Islamic State. In the eyes of the organization, the territorial solution of the question will come with the application of *sharia* to the entire conflict area, perhaps as part of Wilayat Sinai. Indeed, individuals from Gaza, some of whom are former Hamas members, are among the leaders in Wilayat Sinai. The Gaza Strip also provides the organization with a base for recruiting, training, and refuge. For example, it was reported that Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis leader Shadi al-Menei and *Majlis Shura* Mujahidin leader Abdallah al-Ashqar are hiding from Egyptian security forces in the Gaza Strip. This is why at this stage, it does not appear that expressions of support and identification with Islamic State by the Salafi jihad organizations in Gaza are being met by declarations of support by the Islamic State leadership, or that the factions in the Gaza Strip are receiving military or economic support from it in their campaign against Hamas or against Israel. The sporadic attacks staged from Sinai by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis during Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014 as a sign of support for its comrades on the Palestinian side cannot be considered significant support for the Palestinian struggle in general, or the Salafi jihad organizations in particular. Furthermore, as of now, there is no knowledge of any heightened Islamic State activity designed to promote the struggle against Israel from the Gaza Strip.

Israel clearly has much interest in the conflict between Hamas and the Salafi jihad groups in the Gaza Strip, especially given the possibility that an Islamic State infrastructure or a satellite of the group backed by al-Baghdadi could be established there. Any development in this direction is liable to translate into activity against Israel. Indeed, one of the complaints by the Salafi jihad organizations against Hamas concerns their demand that Hamas abandon its policy of military restraint and stop efforts to thwart rocket fire and terrorist operations against Israel. Moreover, despite Hamas's aggressive actions against

its Salafi jihad opponents in the Gaza Strip, the head-on conflict between the camps is liable to nourish criticism against Hamas by the local Gaza population, due to the dire economic situation and the delay in reconstruction of the Strip, following the great destruction caused by Operation Protective Edge. The rising criticism and protests by opposition groups in the Gaza Strip is liable to add an element of pressure on the Hamas leadership to heat up the border area with Israel in order to signal that the economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza and absence of any sign of imminent change for the good cannot continue indefinitely, and that the option of renewed rocket fire by various groups operating in the Gaza Strip, including the Salafi jihad organizations, still exists.

The difficult and threatening situation created in the Middle East by the rise of Islamic State has also created a dynamic of ad hoc common interests, including among countries and non-state organizations such as Hizbollah and even al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra, its Syrian branch. Various aspects of these common interests are clear, for example given the civil war in Syria. Both the coalition led by the US and Hizbollah, which is fighting on the side of Bashar al-Assad's forces, are fighting against Islamic State. Paradoxically, Israel and Hamas also have ad hoc common interests, because each for its own reasons wants to prevent Islamic State from gaining influence in the Gaza Strip that is liable to spread subsequently to the West Bank.

It is possible that in the framework of the effort to halt the expansion of the Islamic State's influence in the Gaza Strip and Sinai, there might be indirect and undeclared cooperation between Hamas and Egypt, and between Hamas and Israel. Such cooperation may emerge, even though Egypt is publicly accusing Hamas of aiding the activity of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Wilayat Sinai, and of concealing, or at least failing to arrest and extradite to Egypt, an operative of the organization. It is also possible that if Hamas takes decisive and effective action against the activity of the Salafi organizations from Sinai in the Gaza Strip, the uncompromising stance of General Abdel el-Sisi toward Hamas could gradually improve. For Israel, a total halt in rocket fire from Gaza by recalcitrant groups, headed by the Salafi jihad organizations, is an essential condition for rapid reconstruction in the Gaza Strip. If Hamas indeed proves its readiness to enter a process of a long term lull with Israel and assistance in the regional campaign to halt the expansion of the Islamic State, it is likely to accumulate points that will slightly offset its negative image, which deteriorated throughout the Middle East following last summer's conflict with Israel.