

Kindergartens and Killing: A Guide to Hamas

by
Bluma Zuckerbrot-Finkelstein

The recent wave of Hamas atrocities in Israel and the contradictory statements emerging from Hamas spokespeople have led to much confusion regarding the nature of Hamas, its goals and the scope of its activities. The confusion stems from the fact that Hamas is simultaneously a terrorist organization and a mass social, political and religious movement. Hamas -- an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement meaning "zeal" -- was created in Gaza by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin shortly before the intifada as a more militant, Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious, political and social movement founded in Egypt and dedicated to the gradual victory of Islam. Since the mid 1970s, the Brotherhood had been expanding its influence in the territories through its vast array of social services. Hamas rendered the Brotherhood's policy of gradual Islamicization ineffectual and advocated an immediate holy war to liberate Palestine.

Yassin was arrested in May 1989 and is currently serving life imprisonment in Israel for ordering the kidnapping and killing of two Israeli soldiers and suspected Palestinian collaborators. From his prison cell, Yassin is believed to still control the movement and his release is one of Hamas' current demands.

Hamas is divided into political and military branches with the former directing Hamas' vast social service network. The military branch is reportedly divided into three wings: an intelligence arm which gathers information about Palestinians suspected of collaboration, an arm which pursues those who have violated Islamic law and the Izzedine al-Qassam squads who are responsible for most of the terror attacks. The al-Qassam squads are comprised of a few dozen activists loosely organized into small, shadowy terror cells, at times operating independently of each other.

Hamas political and military leaders are based throughout the West Bank and Gaza and the organization maintains offices and representatives in Teheran, Damascus and Amman. The connections and levels of coordination between the military and political branches are concealed.

Hamas preaches and engages in violence and terror in order to destroy the state of Israel and replace it with an Islamic state. Its virulent hatred of Jews and Judaism is deeply rooted in the anti-Semitic writings of Muslim Brotherhood theologians. In August 1988, Hamas issued its covenant=

ant laying down its ideological principles and goals. Replete with anti-Semitism, it echoes the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion and charges Jews with an international conspiracy to gain control of the world. In Hamas' worldview, Islamic precepts forbid a Jewish state in the area known as Palestine, the Jewish people have no legitimate connection to the land of Israel and Yasir Arafat is a traitor to the Islamic Palestinian cause. As its covenant proclaims, "The land of Palestine is an Islamic trust... It is forbidden to anyone to yield or concede any part of it... Israel will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it..." Hamas launched its campaign of violence in 1989, first against Israeli soldiers and suspected Palestinian collaborators and then against Israeli civilians. In the wake of the

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Oslo agreement, Hamas leaders intensified their rhetoric and vowed to derail the peace process through violent attacks. Drive-by shootings, firebombings and stabbings increased and suicide missions began in April 1994, when a Hamas suicide bomber rammed an explosives-laden car into a bus in Afula killing eight and wounding 50 others. Since then, Hamas has engaged in at least 10 other suicide bombings. Its campaign of wanton terror has resulted in the deaths of over 130 people. Through systematic indoctrination, social pressure, and the promise of paradise, Hamas religious and military leaders recruit young, poor men for suicide missions and other attacks.

Unlike the more shadowy Islamic Jihad, Hamas is a well-entrenched, all-encompassing presence in daily life in the West Bank and Gaza, administering mosques, schools, clinics, youth groups, athletic clubs and day-care centers. Capitalizing on depleting PLO coffers after the PLO's ill-fated support of Saddam Hussein, Hamas augmented its social service infrastructure, providing Palestinians with essential humanitarian services which the PLO was no longer able to furnish. In fact, 95 percent of Hamas' budget is believed to finance its social service activities.

Several factors make it difficult to assess, with any precision, popular support for Hamas in the territories. Many Palestinians are drawn primarily or solely to Hamas' humanitarian services rather than its political and military doctrines. At the same time, the boundaries between Hamas' political/social and its military activities are blurred particularly since Hamas leaders use mosques, kindergartens, and youth clubs as forums for spewing anti-Israel propaganda and mobilizing support for violence against Israel. In addition, it is not uncommon to find divided PLO-Hamas loyalties within families, resulting in dual and constantly shifting allegiances.

Nevertheless, prior to the September 1993 Israeli-Palestinian agreement, support for Hamas was estimated at 20-40 percent in the West Bank and 60-80 percent in Gaza. Today, direct support for Hamas is estimated at 15-25 percent of the total population with varying degrees of sympathy among many more.

Hamas enjoys strong financial backing from Iran, private benefactors and Muslim charities in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Palestinian expatriates across the globe and American donors. Its budget has been estimated at between \$40-70 million and 85 percent of it reportedly comes from abroad; the remaining 15 percent is raised among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

An Iranian-Palestinian Islamic alliance began to emerge during the intifada and gained momentum with the burgeoning Arab-Israeli peace process in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. United in their militant rejection of Israel and in pursuing the end of the peace process, Hamas and Iran strengthened ties. The bilateral relationship was cemented when a delegation of senior Hamas leaders visited Teheran in October 1992 and was reportedly promised \$30 million annually, as well as training and logistical support in Iran, southern Lebanon and Sudan.

According to U.S. law enforcement officials and Israeli security authorities, Hamas raises funds in the U.S. through mosques, Muslim organizations and legitimate charitable organizations and engages in various other activities here. The amount of money raised in the U.S. as well as the nature and scope of Hamas activity on our shores are difficult to document.

Most of the funds raised here flow to Hamas-run hospitals, schools and charities with only a portion diverted to Hamas' armed wing to finance terrorist attacks. That most of the money

indeed goes to humanitarian services renders it extremely difficult to sever private American donations to Hamas. In January 1995, President Clinton signed an executive order blocking the U.S. assets of "terrorist organizations that threaten to disrupt the Middle East peace process" and prohibiting financial transactions with them. According to the Treasury Department, since the directive, \$800,000 worth of Hamas-related assets have been frozen. It is unfortunate that comprehensive anti-terrorism legislation which passed the Senate in June and would have codified fundraising restrictions and expanded the ban on providing any type of material support to terrorist organizations, was greatly watered down in the version passed by the House.

Other reported Hamas activities in the United States include recruiting members, planning meetings, paramilitary and firearms training, and production and dissemination of hate-filled videos and print materials vilifying Israel, America and moderate Muslims. Centers of Hamas-related activity have been identified in Illinois, Virginia, Michigan, Texas and California.

It is further suspected that the political and military leadership of Hamas was situated in the U.S. between September 1989 and February 1993. In January 1993, two Chicago-area Palestinian-Americans were arrested in Israel for attempting to transfer \$100,000 to Hamas from the U.S. According to Israeli authorities, the two were in Israel to rebuild the Hamas terror network after the December 1992 Hamas deportations.

After this incident and the increasing interest the FBI took in Hamas in the wake of the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Hamas officials are believed to have fled the U.S. A senior Hamas leader, Musa Abu Marzuk, who is suspected of directing attacks against Israel, left northern Virginia and was arrested this past August trying to reenter the country. At this writing, Israel has requested his extradition.

In recent months, divisions within Hamas have surfaced with respect to negotiating with the Palestinian Authority, participating in the nascent Palestinian political process in the West Bank and Gaza and halting armed attacks against Israel. The clandestine and diffuse structure of Hamas renders it extremely difficult to determine the reliability and authoritativeness of recent statements suggesting a cease-fire. It is further unclear whether recent conciliatory messages represent a strategic change in policy or short term tactical considerations in the Hamas effort to gain political power. Ultimately and tragically, recent Hamas actions speak louder than words.

Bluma Zuckerbrot-Finkelstein is Director, Special Projects-Middle East for the national office of the Anti-Defamation League.

This article first appeared in the St. Louis Jewish Light (March 13).