

The growth of Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza and consequences for the peace process

Written by David Maggs

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DAVID MAGGS, JUL 1 2011

This essay argues that the rise of Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza represents a profound challenge for Hamas, one which is exacerbated by its recent unity deal with Fatah, as well as by the potential UN vote in September over Palestinian statehood. Whilst the number and membership of these groups is very small, if Hamas continues with its vague ideology that courts Islamism, democracy, armed resistance and peace, then it could see hardliners within its military wing move over to these new groups.

After looking at the manifestations of this rise, I shall consider its main causes, concluding that Hamas is in too tricky a position to change its current policy of courting both extremists and moderates. Noting that this status quo is far from ideal, I end by suggesting that Hamas could be encouraged to move forward with its suggestions of peace by Israel positively acting on a UN vote in favour of Palestinian statehood.

What exactly is Salafi-Jihadism?

Although the ideology arguably dates back to the 14th or even 9th Century, the term Salafism itself was coined by Muhammad 'Abduh in the 19th Century. It refers to the pious ancestors "*Salaf al-Saleh*", contemporaries and followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Very generally, Salafists believe that Islam should be purged of religious innovations (*Bida'*) in order to return to the principles that governed life during the Prophet's time. Salafist groups who go by this name are largely focused towards non-violent activity aimed at re-Islamising their society from within.

In the mid-20th Century, however, others, such as Sayyid Qutb, (of the Muslim Brotherhood) argued that re-Islamisation could only be achieved through violence. Out of the four main categories of *Jihad*, (struggle by the heart, tongue, pen and sword) he argued that the world's state of *jahilliya* (Islamic ignorance) obliged Muslims to focus explicitly on Jihad by the sword.

We thus have the resulting ideology, Salafi-Jihadism. Hamas claims to be a Salafi-Jihadist group, and yet many who think it is not aggressive or Islamic enough, (as we shall see in this article) have begun to set themselves up in direct opposition to it, complicating the prospects of peace in Israel and the Gaza Strip.

The Growth of Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza

Following Bin Laden's death at the beginning of May, small groups of protestors took to the streets of Gaza City to send a message to the West: "Osama is still in us". (See this story). Although Ismail Haniyeh, de facto leader of Hamas declared the al-Qaeda leader "an Arab hero", his party is by no means comfortable with this latest demonstration of support for radical Salafi-Jihadism.

Hamas, and to a lesser extent Islamic Jihad, used to fully dominate Islamic sentiment in the Gaza Strip. When Salafi-Jihadist groups began to emerge they were happy to be led under the direction of Hamas. For example, one of the

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first of such groups, Jaysh al-Islam (The Army of Islam) took part in the Hamas operation that kidnapped the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006.

However, during the following years, other groups emerged and not only began to operate independently of Hamas' direction, but some also began to directly challenge Hamas' authority in the Gaza Strip. In 2008, a planned visit to Gaza by Tony Blair was cancelled due to warnings from Israeli intelligence that there was a plot to assassinate him. It was further revealed that Hamas was not the perpetrator of the plot, and indeed knew little about it, as was the case when BBC journalist Alan Johnston was kidnapped that same year. These plots were combined by underground extremist groups attacking things they perceived to be too Western, such as internet cafes.

The turning point came in 2009 when one group, Jund Ansar Allah (The Soldiers of God's Supporters) declared an Islamic Emirate in Rafah, Gaza, in effect seceding from Hamas' rule. The response was brutal and Hamas continues to crack down and arrest members of Salafi groups who are too outspoken in criticising Hamas.

This April's murder of Vittorio Arrigoni, blamed on affiliates of the Salafist-Jihadist group Tawhid wa al-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad, who deny the accusation) also illustrates the growing tension between Hamas and its emerging contestants. The innocent Italian activist was targeted as a foreigner and an infidel, accused of courting Muslim women in Gaza. But the demands of his kidnapers were for Hamas to release Salafi-Jihadist prisoners. Hamas' response was as it had been in 2009, and it is currently cracking down on extremist groups yet again.

The Main Causes

So why are an increasing minority of Gazans turning to groups more extreme than Hamas, and why does the Fatah unity deal and the UN vote pose a problem for them?

The answer is that there is antagonism between the ideologically muddled Hamas – a mix of Islamism and nationalism that gestures towards democracy – and the hard-line Salafi-Jihadis, who shun these last two principles. Furthermore, those who supported Hamas as an outlet for violent force also feel betrayed by its mere suggestion of the possibility of cease-fires and peace with Israel. For Salafi-Jihadists, the Fatah unity deal represents further acceptance of these liberal governmental principles, as well as what they perceive to be a corrupt Israeli stooge. If the UN vote in favour of Palestinian statehood, Hamas will further be seen as working off the back of the West, entailing further scaling down of its armed resistance.

Let us consider these factors in more detail.

Salafi-Jihadism offers the general pull of a globally focused ideology. Although Hamas started off as such in the late 1980s, it has toned down its rhetoric about the global caliphate and instead emphasised its identity as a movement dedicated to a nationalist struggle within Palestine. To those who take inspiration from the expansionist Salafi-Wahhabist ideologies that accompany the funding that has poured out of Saudi Arabia since the mid-1970s, nationalism is un-Islamic apostasy. For this reason, there are many who feel that Hamas simply cannot represent Islam in the Gaza Strip, and the main alternative is to re-assert the Salafist ideology they feel Hamas has abandoned.

Exacerbating this tension is the fact that Hamas has been part of the democratically-elected Palestinian Authority since 2006. For hard-line Muslims and Salafis, democracy and Islam are incompatible – law and rulership are dictated by God, not man. To put authority in the hands of the people is to belittle God's dominion. The unity deal with Fatah indicates to Salafi-Jihadis that Hamas is further complying with the authority of the PA, which as an un-Islamic body, in their eyes should possess no authority at all.

Additionally, many in Gaza do not think that Hamas has implemented enough rules and laws to reflect its Islamic nature, revealing that it is not serious about Gaza being an Islamic state at all. A key example of this, and one that has been an endless source of tension, is that women in Gaza are not forced to cover up. Hamas wants to put on a

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veneer of democratic sensibilities in order to draw support from the relatively liberally-minded elements of Gazan society and also from European countries. Once again, however, adopting these perceived democratic principles de-legitimises Hamas in the eyes of Muslims who view “Western” ideas to be incompatible with Islam.

However, some who feel Hamas has abandoned its true Islamic character also complain that it has relaxed its violent approach to Israel.

Hamas has been increasingly perceived as having given up on a core element of its ideology: active resistance. Since the second Intifada, Hamas has been suggesting that it is willing to negotiate a cease-fire/peace with Israel, in exchange for a return to the 1967 borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. For those who adhere to stricter, more extreme Salafi interpretations of Islam, the idea of negotiating with Israel, and of ceasing to struggle for even a temporary period is tantamount to accepting it as a legitimate entity – they want to get rid of Israel completely. For them, any compromise would offend the status of Palestine as an Islamic *waqf*: land that can only be ruled by Muslims. By offering cease-fires, many view Hamas to have given up Palestine’s claim to this status, a feeling that will be strengthened by Hamas accepting a UN vote in favour of Palestinian statehood.

Hamas’ dedication to active resistance is also hampered by the recent unity deal with Fatah. Although some have suggested that the unity deal will see a radicalisation of the PA due to Hamas’ influence, it is far more likely that Hamas will have to tone down its own rhetoric. As the PA survives through US and Israeli support it is unlikely to follow through with speeches about hardening its stance.

However, due to Israel’s support of Fatah, it is viewed not only by the extreme Salafi-Jihhdis in Gaza, but also by the majority of Palestinians, as a stooge of Israel. In the 1990s, it was basically Fatah’s task to crack down on the aggressive activities of Hamas. For Hamas to join it in government (2006) and then attempt to settle their long-standing feud (after the Battle of Gaza, 2007) in recent months illustrates that it is happy to co-operate more with a party that is in league with its supposed enemy. If the unity deal goes according to plan, the question is who will take the position of Hamas as leader of armed resistance, the only option being the minority of Salafi-Jihadists.

Hamas is therefore currently treading a very risky line. According to one of the founders of Jund Ansar Allah, there are around 11,000 Salafis in Gaza, and of those which are Salafi-Jihadists, (i.e. dedicated to violence) around 70% are ex-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas. While we may dispute the exact figure, the point is backed up by many senior Hamas leaders themselves who, when pushed to explain the compatibility of Hamas’ professed desire for peace with its rhetoric about destroying Israel, argue that they don’t want to be seen as weak by their own members. Within the context described in this essay, it is quite clear why, and though the threat is small as yet, it has the potential to be a huge problem in prompting a mass walk out from Hamas to the Salafi-Jihadists.

One last point should be made to further clarify the nature of this threat. Salafi-Jihadist movements do not really represent a viable alternative to Hamas for the majority of Palestinians. As mentioned earlier, Palestinians in general are wary of the binds of being led by an overly Islamic government – theirs is not an aggressively religious society in the vein prescribed by the extremists. Furthermore, Salafi-Jihadist groups shun ideas of government and are much more inclined towards activism and militarism anyway. Although it is suggested by many, it is therefore unlikely that if Hamas does begin to place even less emphasis on armed resistance that the Salafi-Jihadis will rise as a popular militant movement to take its place. Of course there is no reason why they could not change their nature to do so in the future, nor should we be surprised if another movement arises to fulfil that role.

In summary, for Gazans of a more extreme persuasion, Hamas has de-legitimised itself as an Islamic group and as a leader of the resistance against Israel. For the Salafi-Jihadists, the unity deal and an acceptance of a positive UN vote in September would be clear examples of Hamas’ flailing legitimacy. Hamas has therefore enticed a small minority to set up groups that claim to represent Islam in Gaza, and as it tries to accommodate some of the liberal attitudes of its demographic and of Europe, and its new partner Fatah, whose approach to Israel is conciliatory, it will find it increasingly difficult to stop the growth of these groups. Furthermore, the growth threatens to draw members away from Hamas itself.

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Conclusions and Options

Hamas therefore faces three options:

i) If it were to make good of its claims to be searching for a peace deal, and Israel was also willing, then it risks turning an internal divide between moderates and extremists into a full blown separation.

ii) At the other end of the spectrum, it could step up its resistance activities against Israel, thereby dispelling the extremists' accusations of it going "soft". This, however, is unlikely given the recent unity deal with Fatah and memories of Operation Cast Lead in 2009.

iii) The most likely course of actions is thus that, rather ironically, Hamas will be better off in the short term continuing to simultaneously straddle positions of moderation and extremism – basically maintaining the status quo.

This last option however, is not desirable for either side. For Hamas, the rise of Salafi-Jihadism will continue as more frustrated young men are unable to vent their anger and defect from the Qassam Brigades to the Salafi-Jihadists. For Israel this merely puts off increased rocket attacks until another day. For Western policy-makers in Washington and the European capitals, the failure to reach any agreement over the Israeli-Palestinian crisis will continue to sour their relations with the Arab/Islamic nations. Policy-makers thus clearly need to find a way of encouraging option i) at the same time as lessening the blows for Hamas.

The way to do this would be to expand Hamas' ideological popularity base away from its emphasis on armed resistance, and towards its role as a governing body that aims to improve the lives of its constituency. If this is combined with real measures, both political and economic, towards improving Palestinian autonomy then the extremists will become increasingly sidelined and isolated, even more so than they are already.

It is crucial to point out then that it is up to Israel to act. It needs to re-open borders and help the economy of Gaza to breathe. If Gaza is too damaged to breathe, then Israel needs to prop it up with grants and subsidies. At the same time, it needs to seriously consider a return to the 1967 borders, and engage in multilateral agreements that promise movements in this direction.

A UN vote in favour of Palestinian statehood this September would put pressure on Israel to do so. This would help purge Hamas of its more extreme members at the same time as increasing its legitimacy amongst Palestinians (conditional on their lives improving with increased autonomy and economic growth), creating the opportunity for further dialogue with Israel. If this does not happen, in the long run we merely put off the time when Hamas will find its members leaving it for the Salafi-Jihadists, but in this case Hamas will also have exhausted its legitimacy as a force for improving the situation of Palestinians, and a whole new generation will be crying out for a new body to lead the resistance – and it is fairly obvious who that could be. The choice is thus to either slightly increase the amount of Salafi-Jihadists in Gaza now, or wait until they have a larger foothold later.

Therefore, from a long term security point of view, Israel needs to be encouraged to engage with Hamas, and a UN vote in favour of Palestinian statehood this September would do just that.

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