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Palestinian Terrorist Organizations

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There are several organizations within Palestine that are labeled terrorist groups by international governments. The largest and most influential terrorist organization is Hamas. There is also the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Al-Aqsa Brigades. This paper is going to act as a source of information on Hamas and its relationships with the other groups, as well as provide evidence for the prominent role of Hamas in the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Hamas was founded in 1987 primarily by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The word Hamas is the Arabic acronym for "The Islamic Resistance Movement" and means zeal. The group stems from the Egyptian terrorist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the largest Islamic movement in modern times.¹ Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas focuses solely on the establishment of an Islamic Palestinian State by way of Jihad, or holy war. According to its website, this is its sole purpose. Similar to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas operates mosques, schools, clinics, and social programs, as well as extensive charities.² This has allowed Hamas to integrate itself into the political system and gather a following of tens of thousands of supporters throughout the Gaza strip and West Bank territories.

There are several key people involved with Hamas. The first is Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. He was the spiritual and overall leader of Hamas until his execution by the Israeli military on March 22, 2004. He grew up in Gaza and suffered a terrible sports accident that left him paraplegic. Yassin studied in Egypt and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic, non-violent nationalist organization. When he returned to Gaza in the 1980's he, along with six others, formed Hamas as a Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Yassin sought the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic Palestine. He became the spiritual leader and eventually the overall leader of the organization. He kept communication with other Hamas leaders, as well as other Palestinian group leaders. He was also the financial advisor, maintaining close ties to the Saudi Arabian royal family in particular. Yassin, reportedly, received more than \$30 million a year from the Saudis³ as well as funding from other terrorist organizations and Arab governments, in particular, Iran and Syria.

Even though Yassin had been marked by the Israeli and US governments as a terrorist, in the eyes of the Palestinians he was more moderate than many of his followers. He cooperated with the PA and Arafat on many occasions. He had said it would be acceptable to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, albeit *to be used as a temporary base*.⁴ In December of 2003, Yassin offered a truce with Israel that would last for 10 years under the condition that Israel would pull out all of its settlers from Gaza and the West Bank.⁵ However, Hamas has offered 11 proposals for a ceasefire since 1993, so the validity of the offer is disputable. Yassin had great appeal among his followers. He will remain the symbol of resistance to Israeli occupation to thousands of Palestinians throughout Gaza and the West Bank.

Yassin's chief deputy and co-founder of Hamas is Dr. Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, who is the group's leader in the Gaza Strip. Rantissi, who was also raised in Gaza, studied pediatrics in Egypt and is a certified physician. He returned to Gaza in 1976 as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and formed Hamas with Yassin.⁶ Rantissi is more extreme than Yassin. He strongly opposes *any* sort of peace plan with Israel. He is an outspoken critic of the Palestinian Authority. Rantissi believes that, from a political standpoint, the suicide bombings are not terrorism, but a response to Israeli terrorism against Palestinians. They are a way of resisting Israeli occupation in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

When Yassin was assassinated, Rantissi was named the new overall leader of Hamas, but then saw those statements retracted. He remains the political and overall leader in Gaza only, but he appears to have the largest following. This may be because he has been by Yassin's side and was a strong spokesman in Gaza, able to reach the people directly.

Another important Hamas figure is Khaled Meshaal. He is the external political chief based in Damascus, Syria. According to the structure of Hamas, Meshaal is the new interim overall leader after the death of Yassin. He lived in Kuwait and was part of the so-called "Kuwait contingent" (Palestinians who lived and worked there).⁷ He joined Hamas after Iraq invaded Kuwait and took over the political bureau in Amman, Jordan. He was in charge of international fundraising and directed the money to the West Bank and Gaza for the programs run by Hamas. After an assassination attempt by Israeli agents in 1997, Jordan's King Hussein closed down the Hamas headquarters. Meshaal moved to Qatar shortly and then on to Damascus where he now resides. He set up headquarters there and has been a representative of Hamas during talks in Egypt about

the Arab-Israeli conflict. He strongly opposes any accommodation with Israel. He is the most important external leader since he has inherited Yassin's network of foreign supporters.

The organization of Hamas is divided up into the political/military wing and the social/religious wing. It is very hard to distinguish between the political and military parts of Hamas. Both are run by the same group of people. Both are extremely anti-Israel. In the past, members such as Rantissi, strongly opposed any sort of peace plan with Israel and were outspoken critics of the Palestinian Authority. Recent developments, however, suggest a shift. Yassin's remarks regarding a ten year truce between Israelis and Palestinians are evidence of this. After his death, Rantissi's new position in Gaza may affect his stance as well. Known for his strong opposition of any agreement with Israel, he will now have to adjust. "He won't continue with the same rigidity," Rantissi's cousin, Ribhi, said. "He must change a little. He'll become a little more moderate also with the appointments, with the meetings of the PA people, which he used to reject."⁸ Yassin had the capability to reach out to every kind of Muslim, extremist to very moderate because of the policies of Hamas and his stature within the group. In order for Rantissi to continue to bring in all types of members, he will have to be more political and willing to compromise.

The political figures of Hamas control the military wing's operations as well. The military rose up during the first Intifada in 1987 as an organized and disciplined form of resistance to Israel. It is made up of members in the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. These units are currently the ones who have mainly been carrying out terrorist attacks against Israelis. Hamas's military started by using hand grenades and pipe bombs, but in the past 10 years the brigades have been using different tactics, mainly suicide attacks. Suicide bombing, or "martyrdom," according to Hamas members, was not employed by the organization until a Jewish settler from Kiryat Arba viciously killed 29 Arab worshippers at the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron in 1994. In response, Hamas started targeting Israeli civilians. Today, it is the primary method of resistance from Hamas. The membership is large and they seem to have no problem finding new recruits. The recruiters are primarily Hamas members found at the universities in the West Bank and Gaza, and they typically select "martyrs" from either refugee camps or from within Israeli prisons and detention centers.⁹ There is also a group called the Palestinian Holy Fighters among the military who admit to committing terrorist acts. However, the two groups have mainly combined into the Brigades.

Religion plays the most important role within the organization. Hamas is not a secular organization. It draws its guidelines from Islam; its ideas, ways of thinking and understanding of the universe, life and man.¹⁰ However, their version of Islam is extreme and radical in its beliefs. According to Hamas, Islam promotes unity among all Muslims and Arabs. A way that Hamas unifies Palestinians is by providing social welfare programs for the communities in Gaza and the West Bank. In a report from the Institute for Counter-Terrorism, it claims that approximately 90 percent of Hamas' work is in social, welfare, cultural and educational activities.¹¹ They have built mosques, elementary schools, and affordable clinics. Hamas, unlike the corrupt image of the PA, is known among the Palestinian people for its modesty and concern for the Palestinian people, especially among the poor. This is an important element of its popularity among the people. The Quran, from the Hamas point of view, does not allow Muslims to fight except for self defense and to enforce peace.¹² When the Jewish civilian killed the Muslims back in 1994, all Israeli civilians were seen as guilty of oppression by Hamas. They use the belief that they suffer at the hands of the Israelis as a way to bring Palestinians together. The ideological credo, the Islamic Covenant written in 1988, stresses Jihad as the sole and immediate means to solve the problem of Palestine. Its members believe that it is every Muslim's religious duty to participate in Jihad. Hamas' motto is "Allah is our objective, Prophet Mohammed is our best example, the Holy Quran is our constitution, Jihad is our path and martyrdom for the sake of Allah is our best wishes."¹³

With its ideology and social acceptance, Hamas presents itself as an alternative representation of the Palestinian people other than the Palestinian Authority (PA). It is important for Hamas to have some sort of relationship with the PA for political purposes. Yassin accepted that the PA was the governing body of Palestine, but some of Hamas' other members rejected the PA all together because it is secular instead of Islamic, and because it is claimed to be the sole representative of Palestinians. At the Cairo talks in December 2003, Hamas sent a representative and achieved recognition from Egypt and other Arab states,¹⁴ thus confirming its place among the Palestinian people. The organization resembles and takes as its model the Hizbollah terrorist group. Hizbollah is credited with forcing Israel out of Lebanon. It also runs social welfare programs. Recently, it elected representatives to the Lebanese government, which has increased its influence. Hamas, as well, would like to have representation within the government of Palestine and has already had some members run as independents in recent local elections. Since Yassin's death, Hamas and the PA's relations have improved despite the widely reported

antipathy between Rantissi and Arafat. It is clear that Hamas would like to participate in whatever governing body emerges to “run” Gaza if indeed Israel withdraws.

The relationship between Hamas and other terrorist organizations, mainly the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Fatah al-Aqsa Brigades, is also continuing to develop. Even though both the PIJ and the Brigades do not have as much influence as Hamas, there have been joint attacks where all of the groups claim responsibility together. The PIJ, like Hamas, is a radical Islamic group. They operate in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, as well as receive instruction from external leaders. They are not nearly as organized or draw as much support from the Palestinian people as Hamas does. They also believe that Jihad is the ultimate answer in order to create an Islamic Palestinian state. The PIJ and Hamas said this past October that they would “intensify the bilateral coordination and activate the relationship between the joint committees of the two movements both inside and outside Palestine and broaden the scope of consultation and coordination with all the factions and Palestinian forces.”¹⁵ A joint attack occurred four days after the announcement. Not only is the PIJ cooperating with Hamas, but the Brigades said that they have been involved in joint attacks as well. Al-Aqsa Brigades are an offshoot of Arafat’s faction, Fatah, who were originally formed as the Tanzim militia to compete for the support of the Palestinian people with Hamas. However, unlike Hamas, the Brigades are a nationalist group and have no intention to change Palestine from a secular government to an Islamic one. They also differ in that the Brigades agreed that Israel remain a separate state as long as it pulls out from the territories. They were at one point enemies with Hamas, but recently have forged an alliance with each other. A leader of al-Aqsa in Gaza recently stated, “We found we do best when we work together.”¹⁶ Both Hamas and al-Aqsa Brigades have claimed joint attacks on January 14, 2003 and March 14, 2003.¹⁷ The cooperation among militant groups in Palestine creates confusion about the ideology behind the groups that used to separate them from each other. It increasingly seems the only important goal is to get Israelis out of the West Bank and Gaza. So far this year, there have been three joint attacks. Even though this is a small number, it is relatively large since joint attacks have never occurred before. However, the Israeli government states that is not overly worried about this new development among the Palestinian militant groups. The government states that the reason they formed an alliance is because it is becoming more and more difficult to carry out attacks.¹⁸ Should Israel pull out from a significant part of the territories, the alliance most likely will fade and ideology will become a major player in the groups again.

Since Hamas' goal is to eventually become like Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is represented in the government, they are increasingly likely to seek a broader political role. However, there are reasons to believe that Hamas is weakening, not strengthening. First, the leader, Yassin's death will have a major effect on the type and amount of people that it will recruit in the future. Yassin's ability to bring both moderate and extreme Muslims to Hamas is not a prevalent quality in the new leaders, Rantissi and Meshaal. Second, Hamas is resorting to joint attacks, which implies that they do not have the ability to carry out its own attacks anymore. Third, funding for the organization may decrease if Hamas takes more extreme measures than Yassin did. There is a lot of pressure on Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria to decrease their support for Hamas. Yassin had a rapport with these states that the new leaders do not. This causes a problem. The Arab and Persian states are worried that the new leaders will be too radical and strongly oppose the Palestinian Authority, whereas Yassin took a moderate approach to the PA for the sake of his relations with them. In order for the new leaders of Hamas to continue receiving funds from these states, their actions are going to have to be more moderate and cooperative. Fourth, the external leaders do not have Yassin's reputation for "clean hands" financially. Rather, they have a reputation for diverting some of the money that are supposed to be used only for the social welfare programs in Gaza. It is said that they use the money on lavish items for themselves, which disgusts the members of Hamas in both the West Bank and Gaza particularly because Yassin lived so modestly. The image of the external leaders is partially one of a lack of concern about the people in the territories. This is the basis for the argument over leadership as well. Rantissi wants an overall leader to come from Gaza, like Yassin, because of the personal connection with the people and the respect that is shown for them. All of these reasons combined support the claim that Hamas is not as strong as it was when Yassin was its leader and may have some hurdles to overcome in the future if the organization wants to maintain support and funding.

Regarding proposed macro projects, there is reason to believe that Hamas will not oppose future economic development, at least such projects that are seen to promote Palestinian interests in the territories. First, Hamas has recently underscored that it has no intention of targeting the United States or any other state except for Israel; this, because its enemy is solely Israel. Hamas has sought to draw a sharp distinction between it and Al Qaeda partly on this basis. Second, to the extent Hamas seeks political participation, the new leaders will need to maintain a broad base of support—indeed, in the wake of Yassin's death, this will become more and more of an effort for them. If the general public, the PA, al-Aqsa, and other relevant groups and individuals, for

example, the former Palestinian Security Service chief in Gaza, Mohammad Dahlan, want the economic development, then Hamas will be under pressure not to disrupt it.

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