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Undercutting a Culture of Militancy: Designating Hamas Charities

By [Matthew Levitt](#)

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Yesterday, the U.S. Treasury Department designated as a terrorist organization one of the largest Hamas charities in Gaza, the al-Salah Society, along with its director, Ahmed al-Kurd, a well-known Hamas activist. The organization was outlawed by Israel in 2002 and temporarily shut down by Palestinian security services in 2003. The new U.S. designation criminalizes American donations to al-Salah and officially informs banks and donors of the organization's ties to and activities on behalf of Hamas.

Background

Hamas conceals much of its activity behind charitable, social, and political organizations. In particular, Hamas's social welfare network forms the backbone of its proselytizing efforts (*dawa*), generating both popular support for the organization and logistical support for its terrorist attacks. The importance of this network was highlighted at a 1993 Hamas meeting in Philadelphia, which the FBI surreptitiously monitored. In a presentation on "the situation in Palestine" and the status of "Islamic works" tied to Hamas, Muin Kamel Muhammad Shabib, a member of Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, categorized the institutions tied to Hamas as educational (schools, universities, technical institutions); social and charitable (refugee and orphan relief, women's institutions, sports clubs); cultural (public syndicates, media associations); health-care related (clinics, medical centers); and religious. ([Read a transcript \(PDF\)](#) of the meeting.)

Shabib proceeded to name the al-Salah Society as one of "our institutions." As the Treasury designation makes clear, al-Salah and similar Hamas organizations actively radicalize Palestinian society, recruit new members, provide operatives with day jobs, launder funds for the Qassam Brigades' terrorist cells, and provide logistical support for their terrorist attacks.

The Early Years

Founded in the late 1970s, the al-Salah Society was a key element in the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood under Hamas founders such as Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Ismail Abu Shanab. As such, it was part of the foundation upon which Brotherhood leaders built Hamas, officially founded in December 1987 during the first intifada. Indeed, Shanab identified the al-Salah Society as "one of the three Islamic charities that form Hamas's welfare arm."

According to Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, in the 1970s the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood rebuilt its network of charities, societies, and mosques: "People were attracted to the mosques where they were religiously and nationally mobilized. Social institutions were established in order to develop youth sports and cultural activities and provide social services for poor people and orphans." Palestinian scholar Ziad Abu Amr notes that such organizations rallied support for the Islamic movement, especially by using "alms money, *zakat*, to help thousands of needy families."

It is therefore not surprising that al-Salah played a proactive role in Hamas's early activities, including efforts to militarize the Palestinian uprising. According to the Treasury, "The al-Salah Society supported

Hamas-affiliated combatants during the first Intifada and recruited and indoctrinated youth to support Hamas's activities. It also financed commercial stores, kindergartens, and the purchase of land for Hamas." Its director, al-Kurd, served as a Hamas Shura Council member in Gaza during the first intifada.

Recruitment and Indoctrination

Al-Salah's recruitment and indoctrination of Palestinian youth is typical of Hamas. Recruiters use Hamas-sponsored community gatherings, such as charity committees, mosque classes, student unions, and sports clubs, to spot susceptible youth. According to an example cited by the FBI, Ahmed Saltana, a Hamas bombmaker affiliated with the Jenin Charity Committee, recruited young men working for the charity committee to join Hamas. Recognizing this phenomenon, a senior U.S. official noted that, at a minimum, funding any part of Hamas enhances the group's credibility and provides it "the opportunity to recruit people through its charitable activities." A glaring example is the soccer team of the Jihad Mosque in Hebron. In a string of attacks conducted over the first six months of 2003, team members executed five suicide bombings. The team's shirt bore a picture of a hand holding an axe with the inscription "Prepare for the enemy and to fight the occupation."

Logistical Support for Terror

Organizations affiliated with Hamas's political and social activities provide the group with a veneer of legitimacy, and its operatives with day jobs, salaries, and meeting places. For example, documents seized from the offices of the Islamic Relief Agency (IRA) revealed the charity had been paying the salaries of ten West Bank Hamas activists. The FBI has cited several other examples, including Fadel Muhammad Salah Hamdan of the Ramallah Charity Committee, who was "directly connected with the planning of suicide attacks and the spiritual preparation of those about to commit suicide attacks, including the Mahane Yehuda attack in July 1997."

Several branch offices of the al-Salah Society also employed Hamas operatives, including members of the Qassam Brigades. According to press reports, the al-Salah office in el-Bireh was run by a "senior Hamas militant who recruited a suicide bomber who killed 11 people in Jerusalem." The Palestine Center for Human Rights reported that Israeli forces demolished al-Kurd's house in 2004 after finding it was linked to a smuggling tunnel. The Treasury provided more examples yesterday: (1) in late 2002, an official of the al-Salah Society in Gaza was the principal leader of a Hamas military-wing structure in the al-Maghazi refugee camp in Gaza; (2) the founder and former director of the al-Maghazi branch of al-Salah reportedly also operated as a member of the Hamas military-wing structure in al-Maghazi, participated in weapons deals, and served as a liaison to the rest of the Hamas structure in al-Maghazi; and (3) at least four other Hamas military-wing members in the al-Maghazi refugee camp in Gaza were tied to al-Salah.

Foreign Funding for Hamas

While the al-Salah Society once resorted to a local fundraising campaign in Gaza (in response to its closure by the Palestinian Authority), the majority of its funds are raised abroad. According to the Treasury, "The al-Salah Society has received substantial funding from Persian Gulf countries, including at least hundreds of thousands of dollars from Kuwaiti donors." According to seized Palestinian documents, al-Salah also received funding from the Holy Land Foundation in Texas.

According to a 2001 report in the *New York Times*, Saudi supporters sent money for spouses or parents of Palestinians killed (\$5,000) or wounded (\$2,500) fighting Israel to al-Salah's Arab Bank account in Gaza. In addition, Palestinian documents captured in Israeli raids indicate that the Saudi Committee for Support of the Intifada al-Quds transferred funds to several Hamas institutions, including al-Salah. In 2002, the Palestinian press reported that the Kuwaiti Bayt al-Zakah charity provided al-Salah with \$750,000 in one of its funding campaigns. With the U.S. Treasury designation, international banks are unlikely to facilitate such transfers in the future.

Conclusion

Charity committees are Hamas's most effective tool for building grassroots support, radicalizing and recruiting future activists, providing logistical support for terrorist operations and day jobs for operatives, and funding the group's various activities. Shanab, who once said "of course Salah and other Islamic foundations are identified with us [Hamas]," also noted that Hamas charity is not intended to produce immediate benefits, but to perpetuate a culture of militancy and violence against Israel. In 2001 he explained, "If nobody supports these needy families [of Palestinian "martyrs" and prisoners], maybe nobody would think of martyrdom and the resistance of occupation." In 2002 Shanab stated, "We see [humanitarian work] as a means of extending the life span of the Intifada." Designating Hamas committees, and denying them the ability to fulfill this militant vision, is a critical step on the road toward a renewed peace initiative.

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