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Reality Contradicts New Hamas Spin

By [Matthew Levitt](#) and Stephanie Papa
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In recent interviews, Hamas leader Khaled Mashal has offered to cooperate with U.S. efforts to promote a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, indicated a willingness to implement an immediate and reciprocal ceasefire with Israel, and stated that the militant group would accept and respect a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. But the conciliatory tone of this hardline Hamas leader, who has personally been tied to acts of terrorism and is himself a U.S.-designated terrorist, is belied by the group's continued violent actions and radicalization on the ground, as well as the rise to prominence of violent extremist leaders within the group's local Shura (consultative) councils. Hamas's activities of late appear to be diametrically opposed to the compliance of Mashal's statements.

Continued Terrorist Activities

Despite talk of a ceasefire and pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hamas's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, continues to engage in terrorist activities. Shooting attacks are still common along the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip, including the firing of rocket-propelled grenades and mortar shells. In late July, two Qassam Brigades operatives were killed in a "work accident" while placing explosives along the border fence near the al-Burajj refugee camp in central Gaza. A few days later, Israeli defense officials revealed that Hamas has been digging tunnels -- often used by the group to smuggle weapons and conduct kidnapping operations -- next to UN facilities, including one near a UN school in Bait Hanun that had recently collapsed. The placement of the tunnels near UN facilities was purportedly intended as a preventive measure against an Israeli attempt to destroy the tunnels.

Meanwhile, over the past several months, Palestinian security forces in the West Bank have seized at least \$8.5 million in cash from arrested Hamas members who plotted to kill Fatah-affiliated government officials. Palestinian officials reported that some of the accused had "recently purchased homes adjacent to government and military installations, mainly in the city of Nablus" for the purpose of observing the movements of government and security officials. Security forces also seized uniforms of several Palestinian security forces from the accused Hamas members.

Radicalizing Palestinian Society

For Hamas, mutating the predominantly ethno-political Palestinian national struggle into a fundamentally religious conflict is critical to the group's ideology and its continued ability to inspire Palestinians to reject compromise or peaceful solutions to the conflict. Recently, Hamas embarked on a large public relations campaign using culture and the arts to glorify violence and demonize Israel. In a telling example, Hamas produced a feature-length film in 2009 that celebrated the life of Emad Akel, a leading Hamas terrorist who was killed by Israeli troops in 1993. Written by hardline Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar, *Emad Akel* was first screened in July 2009 at the Islamic University in Gaza City and described by Hamas interior minister in Gaza Fathi Hamad as the first production of "Hamaswood instead of Hollywood."

In addition, despite Mashal's statements, Hamas's continues its campaign of radicalization targeting Palestinian youth. This summer, more than 120,000 Palestinian children attended Hamas-run summer camps that focused not only on Islamic teachings, but also on "semi-military training with toy guns." Hamas campers recently staged a play reenacting the Gilad Shalit abduction before an audience that included Hamas officials such as Usama Mazini and Sheikh Ahmad Bahar. For Hamas leaders like Bahar, this is business as usual. In July 2003, a Hamas camp run by Bahar, the al-Aqsa Intifada Martyrs Summer Camp, conducted classes in radical Islam that exposed campers to images of suicide bombers plastered on the camp's walls. As explained by Bahar, teaching children the history of Islam while surrounding them with pictures of martyrs instills "seeds of hate against Israel."

Exposing Palestinian children to such radical messages at a young age has been a tactic employed not only in recreational institutions but also in schools. In 2001, the Islamic Society (al-Jamiyah al-Islamiyah) in Gaza held a graduation ceremony for the 1,650 children who attend its forty-one kindergartens. Photographs of the ceremony show young, uniformly dressed children carrying mock rifles. In the photos, a five-year-old girl dips her hands in red paint to mimic the bloodied hands Palestinians proudly displayed after the lynching of two Israelis in Ramallah, and another child, dressed as Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, is surrounded by other children costumed as suicide bombers. Hamas does not keep its reason for these ceremonies a secret. After his capture, Hamas activist Ibrahim Abd al-Fatah Shubaka told Israeli authorities that the Islamic Charitable Association in Hebron maintains two orphanages and schools that "instill the pupils with Hamas values, and their graduates include operational Hamas activists."

Militants Elected to Leadership Positions

Hamas's ongoing radical activities are particularly apparent in its willingness to place its most militant members in positions of power. This year, Hamas's local Shura councils held elections to determine who would move into leadership positions. Three local councils under the aegis of the Majlis al-Shura, the group's overarching political and decisionmaking body in Damascus, represent Gaza, the West Bank, and Hamas members in Israeli prisons. This last council completed a five-month-long election process in July 2009 that resulted in the appointment of Yahya al-Sinwar, described as the founder of a Hamas security agency who is serving a life sentence, as president of the prison Shura council. Many other Hamas operatives involved in terrorist activities were placed as council members, including:

- Abbas al-Sayyed, the mastermind of the March 2002 Park Hotel suicide bombing that killed 29 people and left 155 seriously wounded. In Tulkarm, he was both an overt Hamas political leader and the covert leader of the Qassam Brigades terrorist cell.
- Salah al-Arouri, a founder of the Qassam Brigades in the West Bank, who served as both a recruiter and commander for Hamas terrorist cells. Al-Arouri received thousands of dollars for weapons procurement from Hamas operatives in the United States, such as key financier Mohammed Salah, and provided additional thousands to Hamas terrorists for weapons to conduct attacks.
- Abd-al-Khaliq al-Natsheh, Hamas's spokesman in Hebron, where he reportedly was the interlocutor between Hamas members who wanted to carry out suicide attacks and the leaders of Hamas terror cells within the Qassam Brigades. He was also responsible for an extensive terrorist infrastructure in Hebron which planned and executed many attacks in Israel, including the April 2002 Adora attack and the June 2002 Karmey attack.

Other Hamas terrorist wing operatives elected to political positions reportedly include Sheikh Jamal Abu-al-Hayja, a commander in the Janin Camp battle; Jihad Yaghmur, a man responsible for Israeli soldier Nachshon Faxman's abduction in 1994; and Muhammad Jamal al-Natsheh, a deputy in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

These elections are a clear continuation of Hamas's efforts to bring terrorist leaders to the foreground. In the August 2008 elections for Gaza's Shura council, for example, Hamas hardliners dominated as well. (See

Conclusion

Hamas's tactical flexibility should not be mistaken for strategic change. Even in his recent interviews, Mashal was clear that Hamas has not rejected terrorism, but has put it on hold due to current circumstances. "Not targeting civilians," Mashal explained, "is part of an evaluation of the movement to serve the people's interests. Firing these rockets is a method and not the goal." In the context of discussing the sharp drop in Hamas rockets fired at Israeli civilian population centers, Mashal added, "The right to resist the occupation is a legitimate right, but practicing this right is decided by the leadership within the movement."

Even as Hamas advances its public-relations blitz for tactical gains, the group continues to advance its strategic goals through ongoing terrorist activities, robust radicalization, and the election of militant hardliners to leadership positions. Until Mashal's softened political statements are matched by parallel changes on the ground, his rhetoric amounts to little more than empty words crafted for Western consumption.

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