

PolicyWatch #1619 : Special Forum Report

Al-Qaeda in the West Bank and Gaza

Featuring [Matthew Levitt](#) and Bruce Riedel
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On January 11, 2010, Matthew Levitt and Bruce Riedel addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the emergence and potential of al-Qaeda-inspired groups in the Palestinian arena. Dr. Levitt is a senior fellow and director of the [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](#) at the Institute. Mr. Riedel, a former CIA officer, is a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Matthew Levitt

Palestinian terrorist groups have long operated out of the West Bank and Gaza. What is new is that some radicalized Palestinians are choosing to engage in violence not through established domestic groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, but rather through groups that aspire to be part of al-Qaeda's global jihad. While most Palestinian terrorist organizations are nationalist -- or, in the case of Hamas, Islamist-nationalist -- and limit their operations to the Israeli-Palestinian front, the Salafi-Jihadi ideology professed by these new groups offers a broader agenda, one based not on a particular nationality but instead on the Muslim umma (nation).

To be clear, al-Qaeda itself is not operating in the West Bank or Gaza. Rather, a number of al-Qaeda-inspired individuals and cells have sprung up, all of limited capabilities and organization, and all hampered by extreme pressure from Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), or Hamas.

In the West Bank, these cells have focused mainly on attacking Israel, though some have expressed interest in striking U.S. targets as well. For example, in June-July 2008, Israeli security forces arrested six individuals -- two Arab Israeli citizens and four Palestinian residents of east Jerusalem -- for alleged links to al-Qaeda. Evidence of these links included commentary on al-Qaeda-affiliated websites, where one of the members had discussed potentially attacking President George W. Bush's helicopter as it landed at the Knesset landing pad, while another had expressed interest in targeting Air Force One.

Such groups have attracted even more attention in Gaza. For example, the al-Qaeda-inspired Jaish al-Islam was behind the March 2007 kidnapping of BBC journalist Alan Johnston. And in mid-August 2009, the group Jund Ansar Allah came to the foreground when cleric Abd al-Latif Musa announced the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Palestine and condemned the Hamas government as un-Islamic. Hamas responded with a violent crackdown, dispatching government security forces and members of its Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades terrorist wing to raid a mosque affiliated with the group, resulting in protracted gun battles.

Despite these incidents, the influence of such groups remains very limited. Membership in Gaza's global jihadist cells is estimated to be in the low hundreds, and the groups themselves enjoy almost no grassroots support. In addition, they have failed to connect more formally with the broader al-Qaeda movement, which is surprising given the latter's antipathy to Hamas and its history of incorporating local conflicts into its global campaign. Al-Qaeda likely doubts the ideological commitment of groups such as Jaish al-Islam, whose leader, Mumtaz Dughmush, is better known for his criminal past than his religious zealotry. The groups' durability

may be a concern as well -- al-Qaeda may be waiting for them to establish themselves before accepting them into the fold.

According to some observers, the rise of such groups suggests that Hamas is no longer the worst option in Gaza, and that Israel should engage the organization without preconditions in order to avoid an al-Qaeda takeover. This would be wrongheaded, though -- Gaza's global jihadist groups are in no position to challenge Hamas's authority, let alone usurp the territory. Nevertheless, their emergence highlights the growing jihadist vacuum in the Palestinian territories, a result of Hamas's willingness to engage in secular politics, its failure to institute sharia, and its crackdown on fellow Palestinians who attack Israel or threaten its rule. These groups are populated in part by disgruntled Hamas members who, having been subjected to the organization's radicalization efforts in the past, desire even more extreme radicalization. Although their capabilities remain limited, they no doubt have grand ambitions for terrorist activity.

Bruce Riedel

Al-Qaeda's relationship with Hamas remains complex and mutable. At first blush, the organizations have much in common, both being extremist Sunni jihadist movements that glorify martyrdom and call for the ultimate destruction of Israel. Likewise, both look to the same ideological sources for inspiration, especially Abdullah Azzam, the so-called "father of the modern jihad," as one former Mossad director described him. Azzam's message -- that jihad is the only answer -- resonates very strongly with both organizations.

Despite these similarities, however, Hamas has always held al-Qaeda at arm's length, opposing any alignment with outside partners. In the mid-1990s, Hamas spiritual founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin stated repeatedly that the group was not part of al-Qaeda's movement, though it admired Usama bin Laden and his followers for carrying out jihad.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's attitude toward Hamas is mixed. On the one hand, the Palestinian group undeniably engages in jihadist activity and has killed Israelis in large numbers. On the other hand, it participates in a number of activities that al-Qaeda considers reprehensible, such as taking part in elections, compromising with other elements of the Palestinian nationalist movement, engaging with the Saudi government, and, increasingly, accepting aid and support from Iran. The notion of a Sunni jihadist movement slipping into Iran's orbit is something that al-Qaeda finds extremely distasteful. The organization's posture toward Hamas has therefore become one of silence.

Paradoxically, al-Qaeda has also remained silent on its adherent groups in the West Bank and Gaza. Just as it avoided endorsing Fatah al-Islam when the jihadist group laid siege to Lebanon's Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in 2007, so today the al-Qaeda core has withheld support for similar groups in the Palestinian territories. The central reason for this hesitance is that none of these groups has been able to carry out a spectacular act of terrorism -- the essential requirement for an al-Qaeda franchise. Thus, one may find implicit support for these groups in al-Qaeda's messages, but nothing more.

In effect, al-Qaeda is hedging its bets in the territories, waiting to see how things develop. If one of Gaza's al-Qaeda-inspired groups emerges as a serious alternative to Hamas and carries out large-scale operations, then al-Qaeda may endorse it. Such an outcome would be very difficult to achieve in an area like Gaza, however, since it is not an ungoverned territory where operatives can run away and hide as in Yemen. The al-Qaeda leadership may also be wary of trusting cell members from the Palestinian arena, viewing them as potential bait dangled by any number of intelligence organizations.

Alternatively, if Hamas moves toward a more radical posture, then al-Qaeda may openly endorse the group. This would be a more desirable outcome from al-Qaeda's standpoint, since Hamas would represent the ultimate franchise. For the time being, however, the movement's leaders continue to view Hamas as a poor fit for the al-Qaeda cycle of jihad, which takes aim first at the United States, the so-called head of the snake, and only later at Israel and the region's pro-American regimes.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cole Bunzel.

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