

The Talibanization of Gaza

By Jonathan Schanzer

HAMAS, THE PALESTINIAN MILITANT GROUP THAT SPLINTERED OFF from the Muslim Brotherhood in early 1988, launched a surprise military offensive on June 7, 2007, to wrest control of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Fatah faction that made up a majority of the PA's leadership. Within six days of fighting, Hamas fighters wearing black ski masks controlled the thoroughfares, media, and even key PA buildings. For the first time since the Sudanese coup of 1989 that brought Omar al-Bashir to power, a Muslim Brotherhood group ruled a significant geographic territory.

Ismael Haniyeh, the ascendant ruler of Gaza, officially denied accusations by the PLO and some Palestinian media outlets that Hamas intended to establish an Islamic emirate.¹ However, it soon became clear that Hamas maintained control of Gaza's predominantly Sunni population through a combination of violence, authoritarian rule, and Islamism. In fact, in the two years since the 2007 coup, the Gaza Strip has steadily exhibited the characteristics of "Talibanization"—a process mirroring the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s whereby the Islamist organization imposed strict rules on women; discouraged activities commonly associated with Western or Christian culture; oppressed non-Muslim minorities; imposed sharia law; and deployed religious police to enforce these laws. This has only served to underscore the dangers associated with the rise to power of Islamist groups in the Muslim world.

Hamas's tyrannical rule in Gaza has since presented something of a liability for its parent organization the Muslim Brotherhood, which has sought in recent times to whitewash its image internationally and to portray itself as a reform movement committed to peaceful and democratic change. While the Egyptian Brotherhood's deputy chairman, Mohamed Habib, downplayed the linkages between the two

groups in June 2008, stating that “there are no organizational links whatsoever between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas,”² Abdul-Hameed al-Ghazali, a political consultant to the Brotherhood (and political science professor at Cairo University), stated two months earlier that there are “continuous communications between Egypt’s MBs and Hamas for advice and exchange of opinions.”³ Moreover, the Hamas charter (which has not been changed since it was first issued in 1988) states unequivocally that Hamas is “one of the wings of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine.”⁴

The June Fighting

PRIOR TO LAUNCHING THE VIOLENT COUP THAT ENABLED THE ISLAMIST GROUP TO capture the Gaza Strip in June 2007, Hamas had no experience in governance. Indeed, since its inception in late 1987 or early 1988, the group was a non-state actor best known for its violent opposition to the 1990s peace process between the PLO and Israel. While its Islamist ideology has had varying influence on the Palestinian Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas has enjoyed only nominal control in pockets of Palestinian areas where allied clans and tribes welcomed their influence.

The group’s abrupt transition from opposition group to *de facto* rulers of Gaza in June 2007 demonstrated a reckless disregard for the population it would govern. According to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), Hamas’s actions during the coup were characterized by “extra-judicial and willful killing,” including incidents where Hamas fighters pushed PA loyalists and Fatah faction members from tall rooftops. Hamas abducted and executed political foes, killed some that were already injured,⁵ or shot them in the legs point-blank to ensure permanent disabilities.⁶

While Hamas attempted to explain the violence in the context of its paramilitary war with the rival Fatah faction, PCHR reported attacks against private domiciles, hospitals, and ambulances. So, while internecine rivalry accounted for some violence, it became clear to observers that Hamas was guilty of gross violations of human rights. All told, the June civil war claimed the lives of at least 161 Palestinians, including 11 women and 7 children. More than 700 Palestinians were wounded.⁷

After the war ended, Hamas announced on television the “end of secularism and heresy in the Gaza Strip.”⁸ Hamas then began openly to mistreat the minority Christian community, mostly Greek Orthodox, which had co-existed with Gaza’s predominantly Sunni population for centuries. On June 14, masked gunmen attacked the Rosary Sisters School and the Latin Church in Gaza City with rocket-propelled grenades. They destroyed the cross, Bibles, computers, and other property.⁹ Later that month, Hamas kidnapped Professor Sana al-Sayegh, a teacher at Palestine University in Gaza City, and reportedly forced her to convert to Islam.¹⁰

In October 2007, the proprietor of the Holy Bible Association, Rami Ayyad, was found dead in the Gaza City suburbs. Ayyad had been receiving death threats from Islamists.¹¹ His offices were also hit with a grenade during the 2005 protests over the Prophet Mohammed cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.¹²

By one count, there were more than 50 attacks against Christian targets in the aftermath of the Hamas coup, including barbershops, music stores, and a U.N. school.¹³ Christians increasingly feared they would be forced to submit to Islamic law or leave the Gaza Strip.¹⁴

In February 2008, gunmen blew up the YMCA library in the Gaza Strip. They kidnapped guards, looted the offices, stole a vehicle, and destroyed some 8,000 books.¹⁵ That attack came days after a Hamas “modesty patrol” attacked a Christian youth’s car after he drove home a female classmate.¹⁶ In May, unidentified gunmen again bombed the Rosary Sister’s school.¹⁷ In both May and June, Islamists broke into the El-Manara School in Gaza, detained and beat two guards, and stole a bus.¹⁸ In July, three masked men broke into the home of Constantine Dabbagh, Executive Secretary of the Near East Council of Churches. The men beat him and his wife before stealing money and jewelry.¹⁹ The practice of Christianity, according to one reporter, was now largely “happening privately or in homes.”²⁰

Human Rights Violations

MORE THAN 1,000 PERSONS, MOSTLY MEMBERS OF FATAH OR THE PA, WERE ILLEGALLY arrested or detained in the first months of Hamas rule. They were detained in 23 different locations, according to Amnesty International.²¹ Maan News Agency reported that the leader of Hamas’s Executive Force, Jamal Jarrah, admitted to torture, but that Hamas was trying “to minimize violations and avoid them through the training of our members.”²² In September 2007, five Fatah members, after being abducted by Hamas, were hospitalized and diagnosed as having been tortured.²³ Concurrently, PCHR documented Hamas torture, citing cases where Fatah members were “handcuffed and blindfolded,” “sustained fractures to the feet” from beatings with sticks, and had pieces of cloth stuffed in their mouths to stifle their screams.²⁴

In May, Hamas illegally detained the governor of Khan Younis in southern Gaza, along with three Fatah activists.²⁵ In July, Hamas arrested the director of Gaza’s electric company, and held him without formal charges for six months.²⁶ Hamas abducted political rivals, only to return them without their mustaches or the hair on their heads.²⁷

Hamas claimed it was dismantling networks of Israeli “collaborators,” allegedly hired by Israel to gather intelligence or to carry out anti-Hamas activities.²⁸ This was

also Hamas's justification to round up hundreds of Fatah activists during Israel's Operation Cast Lead in December 2008 and January 2009. Fatah members were allegedly kidnapped and held in schools and hospitals, which became makeshift interrogation centers. Three detainees reportedly had their eyes put out by their interrogators for allegedly providing Israel with targeting information against Hamas.²⁹

Human Rights Watch documented numerous Hamas abuses against Gaza civilians during Operation Cast Lead, including the execution of 32 political rivals, shooting of 49 persons in the legs, and breaking the limbs of a 73 others.³⁰ Fatah confirmed much of this by releasing a list of 181 persons "killed, shot or maimed by the *de facto* government."³¹

As of late July 2009, the Hamas interior ministry issued a warning that it will hunt down all "collaborators and traitors in an effort to achieve 'total security.'"³²

Sharia & Military Courts

FOR PALESTINIANS WHOSE RIGHTS WERE VIOLATED, THERE WAS LITTLE REDRESS. As the PA judicial system in Gaza collapsed,³³ sharia courts became the primary arbiters of disputes. The courts, presided over by Hamas-appointed judges, wielded Islamic jurisprudence to make judgments. However, as Amnesty International noted, the judges lacked "adequate independence, impartiality, training, oversight, and public accountability."³⁴

Hamas also created "Palestine Islamic Scholars Association" branches across Gaza. These entities, which also lacked sufficient legal training, employed up to eight religious scholars per branch.³⁵ In many cases, their judgments were Hamas's political edicts. For example, the association ruled that a health workers' strike, in protest of Hamas rule, violated Islamic law.³⁶

In December 2008, the Hamas parliament reportedly voted in favor of establishing criminal sentences according to sharia law.³⁷ Hamas denied these reports, but unquestionably engaged in ongoing discussions on the implementation of sharia.³⁸

Hamas also meted out justice through the Gaza High Military Court. Following Operation Cast Lead, it sentenced several Palestinians to death for collaborating with Israel. Observers noted a "lack of adequate evidence."³⁹ Months later, the court continued to issue death sentences. In March 2009, for example, the court sentenced three Palestinians to death for allegedly murdering a Gaza merchant.⁴⁰

In another sign of the potential implementation of sharia law, Gaza's top judge in July 2009 ordered all female lawyers to wear headscarves when they appear in court. The Palestinian Center for Human Rights called the move a "dangerous violation of personal freedoms and women's rights."⁴¹

Islamic “Enforcement”

THE ISLAMIZATION OF JUSTICE IN GAZA HAS BEEN COMPOUNDED BY THE EMERGING strength of the “Authority for the Propagation of Morality and Prohibition of Vice,” aimed to “fight those who are being corrupted by Satan, and do not observe sharia law.”⁴² The vice squads were not new; they had operated in Hamas-controlled neighborhoods in Gaza and the West Bank for years. Under Hamas rule, however, they began to operate in wider territory and with impunity.

In June 2007, vice squads bombed a pool hall, as well as a tiny shop selling popular Arabic music.⁴³ In October, the squads made headlines when members beat a singer after a performance in Khan Younis.⁴⁴ Other targets included internet cafes and pharmacies. As attacks increased, so did the number of men who grew beards and women who wore veils. Many reportedly chose these expressions of Islamic piety out of fear rather than conviction.⁴⁵

Hamas forces policed the streets for couples walking together, and took it upon themselves to verify their marital status. Mixed bathing at Gaza beaches was frowned upon. Hamas forces also reportedly seized alcohol throughout the Gaza Strip.⁴⁶

No Free Press

HAMAS UNDERSTOOD THAT ITS ACTIONS WOULD BE HEAVILY CRITICIZED, AND worked hard to cover its tracks. A month after the coup, Hamas briefly prevented the distribution of Fatah-aligned newspapers, including *al-Ayyam* and *al-Hayat al-Jadida*.⁴⁷ Hamas also jailed some of the papers’ circulation officials, and pulled the plug on pro-Fatah television and radio stations.⁴⁸

International media also suffered. Hamas gunmen attacked two cameramen from the Abu Dhabi satellite television channel and stormed the Gaza bureau of the al-Arabiya satellite channel in August.⁴⁹ Hamas gunmen also detained a German television crew after it shot footage portraying Hamas in a negative light.⁵⁰

In an effort to gain control, Hamas announced a ban on stories that could “cause harm to national unity.”⁵¹ When Hamas did not like a particular reporter or outlet, they did not issue government credentials, required for all journalists in Gaza. The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate protested this tactic, as well as the ban on phrases such as “Hamas militias” and “ousted government.”⁵² The Union of Palestinian Journalists reported that Hamas regularly threatened and blackmailed reporters.⁵³ The Foreign Press Association corroborated these reports, claiming Hamas engaged in “harassment of Palestinian journalists.”⁵⁴ Rights groups documented more than

nine assaults on journalists and 21 illegal arrests.⁵⁵ According to Reporters Without Borders, Hamas “failed to investigate” these incidents.⁵⁶

In May 2008, press reports indicated that Hamas would block websites deemed “unfit according to Islamic rules.”⁵⁷ Two months later, Hamas officially banned three Palestinian newspapers run out of the West Bank—*al-Quds*, *al-Ayyam* and *al-Hayat*. Hamas also stormed the offices of a Palestinian news agency, WAFA, and arrested a German cameraman.⁵⁸ The cameraman was reportedly tortured while he was detained.⁵⁹

After Operation Cast Lead, Reporters Without Borders noted that Hamas was, “responsible for serious press freedom violations. Contrary to what its leaders say, journalists are not free to criticize the Islamist movement, to communicate the stance of other factions, or simply to set forth divergent opinions. Most journalists... share this point of view, but none of them can express themselves publicly, so great is the risk of reprisals.”⁶⁰ Thus, the extent of Hamas’s misrule in Gaza remains undocumented.

An Ikhwani State?

ACCORDING TO A HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH REPORT IN APRIL 2009, HAMAS VIOLATIONS had “not stopped since major hostilities ceased on January 18.” The report documented “14 more killings between January 18 and March 31, 2009.”⁶¹ In mid-April, Maan News Agency reported that Hamas gunmen had shot three Fatah members in the legs.⁶² In June, Hamas police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration in Gaza City, wounding three civilians.⁶³ In July, Hamas police opened fire on a wedding party in Beit Lahia after participants raised a portrait of a Fatah activist who was killed in the June 2007 fighting.⁶⁴

The Hamas regime does not justify these actions with Islamist rhetoric. Rather, it deflects criticism by pointing out a multitude of similar Fatah violations (illegal arrests and torture) in the West Bank against Hamas loyalists. The Islamist group has admitted on occasion that the ongoing civil war is regrettable, but is quick to allege Fatah collaboration with the reviled Israelis and Americans.⁶⁵

The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, has largely remained silent regarding Hamas’s continued violation of human rights in Gaza and its reflection on the wider Muslim Brotherhood movement. According to a high-ranking member of one of the Egyptian opposition parties, the Brotherhood has instead elected to pay lip service on the need for Palestinian unity, stress the importance of Egyptian government efforts to bring Hamas and Fatah together, and focus on Israeli policies that have had a deleterious impact on Gaza’s civilian population.⁶⁶ Indeed, while the Brotherhood remained silent during two years of misrule in Gaza, the organization’s leader, Mohammed Mahdi Akef, called upon his supporters to launch a jihad for the

Palestinians in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead.⁶⁷ Similarly, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), which has been identified by the FBI as front organization for the Muslim Brotherhood in America,⁶⁸ launched a 2008 campaign to “send 20,000 letters to Congress advocating an end to Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip,” but has remained silent on the issue of Hamas’s misrule in the beleaguered territory.⁶⁹ Thus, if any Muslim Brotherhood leaders or associated organizations have confronted Hamas over the group’s governance in Gaza, they appear to have done so beneath the radar.

While the Brotherhood’s silence prevails, there have been fleeting attempts to apologize for Hamas’s misconduct. In one article that appeared on the Brotherhood’s website, for example, Hamas is described as an “exceptional case” because it “doesn’t govern an actual state.” Moreover, the website claims that it “should not be treated as representative of political Islam, since it remains a violent group that hasn’t yet renounced terrorism.”⁷⁰ Hamas has reinforced the dangers associated with Muslim Brotherhood governance, namely the admixture of Islamism, political violence, and authoritarian rule. Whether this impacts deleteriously the Brotherhood’s Western outreach or long-standing popularity on the Arab street is yet to be seen.

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