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To cite this article: Barak Mendelsohn (2009) Al-Qaeda's Palestinian Problem, *Survival*, 51:4, 71-86, DOI: [10.1080/00396330903168865](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330903168865)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330903168865>



Published online: 15 Feb 2011.



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Something bad is happening to al-Qaeda. Although it is achieving considerable successes, along with its local allies, on its current main fronts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, its campaign in the highly prized Iraqi arena, where it took the lead, is collapsing. Moreover, al-Qaeda has failed to carry out any high-profile attacks against 'Western crusaders' in the United States or Europe in four years. Limited in their ability to operate, al-Qaeda's leaders have saturated jihadi forums with recorded statements but found that they can barely break out of this relatively small pool of sympathisers. The Western media pays little attention to their almost predictable rants and threats, and even the Arab media shows much less interest than in the past. Even worse, growing dissatisfaction with al-Qaeda's mode of operations and its responsibility for the killing of numerous Muslims has led to a noticeable decline in its image throughout the Muslim world.

While its ability to operate in the heart of the Middle East is in decline, al-Qaeda has issued increasing numbers of statements dedicated to the Palestinian issue, in which it expresses support for the Palestinians, identifies with their plight, and accuses Arab regimes of abandoning their Palestinian brethren for cooperation with Israel. Many statements also attack Hamas's positions and ask Palestinians to prepare for the arrival of their jihadi brothers. The increased attention is not coincidental. In distress, al-Qaeda is

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seeking to use the Palestinian question to improve its image by presenting itself as the true defender of the Palestinian people.

Al-Qaeda's growing pains

Long a champion of war against the US-led 'Zionist–crusaders' alliance, al-Qaeda has had little to show its sympathisers in recent years. It succeeded in dragging the United States and NATO into what seems like an unwinnable war in Afghanistan and was instrumental in spreading instability in Pakistan. It also bled US forces in Iraq. But al-Qaeda has played mostly a supporting role in the Afghan and Pakistani arenas, with the Taliban taking the lead, and botched its campaign in Iraq. Its loss in Iraq is particularly disappointing for an organisation that values the establishment of a base in the heart of the Middle East even more than success in Central Asia.¹ There was a time when al-Qaeda believed that victory was at hand, and had begun to prepare for the post-US period. Today, its Iraq campaign is in shambles. Moreover, al-Qaeda's 'bread and butter', attacks in 'crusader' countries, have been largely absent. For eight years it has failed to penetrate the American security wall, and has not carried out a significant operation on a Western target outside the Middle East since the 2005 London bombings.

In addition, a series of operations in Middle Eastern countries from 2003 failed to erode local regimes' hold on power, but resulted in the killing of numerous Muslim civilians in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan and Algeria, undermining the sympathy of an important constituency: Muslims who do not necessarily support al-Qaeda's goals but share its hostility to the United States and oppressive Middle Eastern regimes. The bombing of three hotels in Amman in November 2005 was particularly damaging to al-Qaeda's reputation and resulted in a steep decline in its image throughout the Muslim world. Even within jihadi circles, al-Qaeda's stature suffered when it attempted, with severe brutality, to coerce all Islamic Sunni insurgency groups in Iraq to unite under its leadership within the framework of the 'Islamic State of Iraq'.

Al-Qaeda sees itself as a vanguard whose role is to serve as a beacon, showing the road for the umma (global Muslim community) to follow. But al-Qaeda understands that the umma will join it only if the jihadis' image is

spotless.² Recognising that its reputation had suffered, al-Qaeda took remedial measures and initiated a 'charm offensive' in which it even admitted to mistakes.³ Equally remarkable were Ayman al-Zawahiri's two online 'town hall' sessions in which he tried to explain al-Qaeda's positions and actions. As utilitarian as this exercise was, it allowed a glimpse into the breadth of the critique to which al-Qaeda has been subjected and exposed the sense of urgent need to rehabilitate its reputation. For example, an Algerian student challenged the legal foundations for killing innocents in martyrdom operations and sarcastically congratulated al-Zawahiri on the killing of innocent Algerian students, children and women on a Muslim holiday. Another questioner asked, 'what is it that makes legitimate the spilling of the blood of even one Muslim?'⁴

Al-Qaeda's public-relations problem has been exacerbated by its minimal targeting of Israel, glaring in comparison to the carnage it has wrought in Muslim countries. As al-Zawahiri himself admitted, the Palestinian issue has a unique ability to rally the Muslim world.⁵ On the other hand, as al-Qaeda found out, absence from the Palestinian front can become a major source of criticism. A number of questioners critically challenged al-Zawahiri over al-Qaeda's record in Muslim countries and its absence from the Palestinian arena:

Who is it who is killing with Your Excellency's blessing the innocents in Baghdad, Morocco and Algeria? Do you consider the killing of women and children to be jihad? I challenge you and your organization to do that in Tel Aviv. Why have you – to this day – not carried out any strike in Israel? Or is it easier to kill Muslims in the markets? Maybe it is necessary (for you) to take some geography lessons, because your maps only show the Muslims' states.

The confrontation with Israel is a serious challenge for al-Qaeda. Prior to 11 September 2001, the organisation showed little interest in the Palestinian question. Palestine was listed among Osama bin Laden's grievances against the West and the Middle Eastern regimes, along with other Muslim territories allegedly occupied by non-Muslims; it received even slightly greater

weight due to Jerusalem's unique religious importance. But bin Laden and al-Zawahiri were clearly more interested in their homelands of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. When al-Qaeda referred to the Palestinian problem, it was often in support of its propaganda efforts. For instance, bin Laden used the 'abandonment of Palestine' as an example of the poor condition of the umma following the destruction of the Ottoman Caliphate and its replacement by a host of 'tyrant' leaders.

However, the collapse of the peace process and the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada refocused Muslim public opinion on Palestine

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and gradually turned al-Qaeda's attention to the Palestinian question, which became a test case for its sincerity and prowess. Words of support were no longer sufficient. But al-Qaeda has not carried out any noteworthy attack in Israel. Its spokesmen have listed – somewhat defensively – attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets in Kenya and Tunisia as evidence that

al-Qaeda is true to its promises, while justifying the lack of attacks inside Israeli territory by blaming the 'puppet Arab regimes' that block its access to the Palestinian front. Al-Qaeda also suggests that attacks on the United States and its allies amount to attacks on Israel because they are Israel's 'fathers, creators, guardians and protectors'.⁶

There have been indications that al-Qaeda's long-term plan includes the Palestinian arena. In 2005, the newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi* serialised a book on al-Zarqawi written by Fuad Hussein, a Jordanian author close to jihadi circles. Hussein argues that al-Qaeda has marked out the removal of Israel as one of its main goals. In addition to the intrinsic appeal of this objective, attacking Israel is expected to weaken the Arab regimes, win al-Qaeda credibility among Muslims, prove its eligibility to lead the umma, and win it recruits as well as financial and moral support. To some extent, from the organisation's perspective, beating Israel, the spearhead of the West planted in the heart of the Islamic world, is a key to the success of the entire jihadi project.⁷

Hussein also presents al-Qaeda's strategic plan through the year 2020. The plan is divided into seven stages, beginning with the 'awakening stage'

that started with the preparations for the 11 September attacks. In the second, 'eye-opening' stage (2003–06), al-Qaeda was supposed to engage in direct confrontation with Israel in Palestine. It also expected to turn Iraq into a base from which it would later deploy its forces to carry out attacks on neighbouring countries. The goal of a comprehensive direct confrontation with Israel would be further advanced in the third stage (2007–10), when 'eyes are opened and the movement's power is multiplied'. The focus of this stage would be the Levant and would be based on exploiting opportunities in states that had lost their control over security. In the following stage, al-Qaeda plans to focus on overthrowing the Arab regimes. The all-out confrontation between the 'forces of faith and the forces of global atheism' will begin in 2016 after the establishment of an Islamic state. In that stage, Israel will no longer be able to withstand Islamic power.⁸

An essay written by an al-Qaeda ideologue using the pseudonym 'Asad al-Jihad2' and posted to a jihadi website at the beginning of 2008 repeated the parts of this plan that pertain to the Palestinian front. It claimed that by the end of 2009, al-Qaeda would complete the long preparations for jihad in Palestine (the base for these preparations being Iraq). Then, fierce battle would take place in the fourth stage, between the years 2010 and 2013. The author proceeded to advise Palestinians on how to prepare for the arrival of foreign fighters and for the upcoming jihad, by practicing martial arts, building bombs and rockets, acquiring weapons, storing food, and learning ways to bring in and protect the Muhajirun (foreign fighters).⁹

But despite abundant motivation, al-Qaeda does not have the capability to shift its operations to the Palestinian arena and transform Palestinian territories into bases from which to attack Israel. As al-Qaeda members lament, entry into the Palestinian territories requires traversing Arab countries – Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt – that are hostile to al-Qaeda. Moreover, access to the West Bank requires operatives to cross Israel, and to reach Gaza they must slip through Egyptian security. Even if successful, turning the Palestinian territories into an al-Qaeda base hinges on the reception the foreign jihadis receive from the local authorities; both Fatah and Hamas, however, view al-Qaeda's presence as a threat and will not welcome the new arrivals.

Another factor hindering al-Qaeda's expansion into the Palestinian theatre is its unfinished business in Iraq. While delighted by the prospects of a jihadi base in the heart of the Middle East, al-Qaeda found itself under American pressure in Afghanistan and could not organise in 2003 to fight the invading American forces in Iraq. Soon, the niche of 'foreign insurgents active in Iraq' was captured by a different jihadi group led by al-Zarqawi, who had a history of turbulent relations with al-Qaeda. Unable to establish an independent presence in Iraq, al-Qaeda opted for a second-best choice and, after long negotiations, persuaded al-Zarqawi to become al-Qaeda's franchise in the region. But this merger, while giving al-Qaeda a foothold in Iraq, took place largely on al-Zarqawi's terms. When he died in June 2006, al-Qaeda was finally able to install one of its loyalists as al-Zarqawi's successor, only to quickly see its efforts collapsing, largely due to its fighters' excesses, which turned Sunni tribes and local jihadi groups against it.¹⁰ Currently, al-Qaeda in Iraq, and its front the Islamic State of Iraq, are facing a dire situation, but the organisation is still trying to salvage this arena. In fact, one element in its effort focuses on attempting to channel Muslim rage over the fate of Palestinians to gain support and recruits to fight in Iraq.

During its heyday in Iraq, al-Qaeda's propaganda already linked the fighting there to the Palestinian cause,¹¹ but it reverted to this technique more frequently after the reversal of its fortunes in the country. Al-Qaeda declared that a victory in Iraq had to be achieved before it could open a front against Israel. Bin Laden clarified that the mujahadeen had not forgotten their Palestinian brothers and promised that once the fighters emerged victorious in Iraq, 'legions' would march to liberate Palestine from Israeli hands.¹² He also directed a particular call to the Palestinians living in refugee camps in Arab countries, portraying jihad in Iraq as an opportunity for them: since they were currently unable to support their brothers' jihad inside Palestine, they should work for victory in Iraq and unite with their Palestinian brothers afterwards.¹³

In the same vein, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, head of the Islamic State of Iraq, urged Muslims to assist the Palestinians by, among other things, donating money and supporting the media effort.¹⁴ In addition, he asserted that increasing the pressure on the umma's enemies in other battlefields,

mainly Iraq and Afghanistan, would relieve the pressure on the Palestinians. Al-Baghdadi also called upon Palestinians in Jordan, and the people of Egypt, to revolt against their governments, break through borders and join the jihadi forces within Palestine. Yet despite this alleged interest in assisting the Palestinians, it became apparent that al-Baghdadi's main objective was to save the jihad in Iraq. Thus, in declaring his hope that the Islamic State of Iraq would become the cornerstone for the liberation of al-Quds (Jerusalem), he immediately tried to link this objective to al-Qaeda's fight in Iraq. Specifically, he argued that the United States had carried out a fierce campaign against the group in Anbar province for fear that its geographical proximity to Iraq's western borders would allow it to launch missiles at Israel and serve as a bridgehead to Palestine.¹⁵

Al-Qaeda's Hamas problem

Operational limitations are not the only factor constraining al-Qaeda's desire to join the Palestinian front. In recent years its relationship with Hamas has grown increasingly sour, finally developing into a full-blown rivalry. It was not always this way. Contrary to its negative view of the Palestinian Authority, which it deemed an apostate regime, al-Qaeda initially held a positive opinion of Hamas and its (late) leader Sheikh Ahmad Yasin. Although the two movements had ideological differences, al-Qaeda saw Hamas as a fellow jihadi group, rather than as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially in the first few years of the second Palestinian intifada. Al-Qaeda approved of Hamas's refusal to join the political system of the Palestinian Authority and its leading role in attacking Israel. Its regular use of suicide bombing demonstrated tactical affinity with al-Qaeda and rendered this tactic more legitimate in the eyes of many Muslims. Al-Qaeda must have been unhappy with Hamas's attempts to distance itself from al-Qaeda following 11 September 2001, but it still identified with Hamas's struggle.

But when Hamas began to reconsider its strategy in the Palestinian arena and its approach to Israel, the ideological gap between the two movements widened, eventually producing a war of words. Loyal to the view that the Palestinian question is primarily a Muslim, not a Palestinian, affair, al-Qaeda

is unwilling to show deference to the Palestinian movements; it sees itself as fulfilling a responsibility to the umma by offering advice and sounding alarm bells about the misguided actions of the Palestinian groups.¹⁶ Moreover, al-Qaeda doctrine specifies that Palestine is not an isolated conflict but part of a broader war between Islam and the West. Therefore, the struggle requires expansion beyond a narrow nationalistic perspective¹⁷ and is intrinsically linked to al-Qaeda's war against the US-led camp.

Specifically, three major Hamas decisions drew al-Qaeda's ire: its participation in the elections for the Palestinian legislative council (January 2006), its power-sharing agreement with Fatah (February 2007), and its

refusal to impose sharia after ousting Fatah loyalists from the Gaza Strip (June 2007). At every step, outspoken al-Qaeda leaders offered advice and then responded with harsh criticism when Hamas rejected their positions. Al-Qaeda's statements underscored differences regarding the obligation to liberate an Islamic land, the best way to con-

Three major Hamas decisions drew al-Qaeda's ire

front Israel, the role of democracy, the relationship between nationalism and Islam, and even the status of Shi'ites. Expressing general disappointment, al-Zawahiri concluded that Hamas had transformed from 'a mujahid movement to part of the Arab consensus which surrenders to America, the Arab consensus which sells the lands of the Muslims'.¹⁸

Al-Qaeda rejected Hamas's participation in the political process because it was conceived under a secular constitution (rather than an Islamic one) and entailed sharing one legislative council with secular and nationalist Palestinian forces that supported a compromise with Israel. Such a decision, al-Qaeda argued, implied acceptance of the council's authority and the legitimacy of the agreements that the authority had signed. Furthermore, it amounted to 'slaughtering the Shari'ah' by agreeing to follow the 'infidel religion of democracy'.¹⁹

Democracy, al-Qaeda speakers argue, represents the rule of the people and is therefore incompatible with sharia. The right to legislate cannot be placed in a parliament but must be reserved for God alone. By elevating human judgement, democracy puts men's rule above God's: a believer can

under no circumstances choose to follow human decisions, particularly when they conflict with God's decrees. The danger of such conflict is especially alarming because the majority of Palestinians may choose to reach a settlement with Israel that includes territorial concessions in violation of Islamic imperatives – at least from the jihadi perspective.²⁰

Al-Qaeda finds Hamas's stance toward Israel and the practical policies deriving from it particularly troubling. It views the recovery of any land that was once under Muslim control as a non-negotiable religious imperative and an objective that can be achieved only through jihad. In fact, it is mandatory for any Muslim to partake in jihad to free those occupied territories. Thus, it is impermissible to concede to Israel any part of the land, and willingness to reach a compromise is unacceptable. Even an incremental programme to recover part of the land by agreement before pursuing the rest is prohibited.²¹ The impermissibility of compromise implies that there is no room for negotiations with Israel. Muslims should never accept Israel's existence and must seek its destruction. Although Hamas's covenant states that the movement is bent on the destruction of Israel, al-Qaeda leaders criticise Hamas, charging that its actions indicate that it no longer adheres to the principles of eradicating Israel and recovering every inch of Palestine.²²

Al-Qaeda accuses Hamas of recognising Israel indirectly. Recognition, al-Zawahiri has argued, takes various forms. Because the UN is based on the principle of aspiring to peaceful relations among all member states, as well as respect for their sovereignty and the integrity of their territories, participating in a Palestinian government with recognised status in the UN amounts to recognising Israel.²³ Hamas's acceptance of the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority, founded on the Oslo Accords in which the Palestine Liberation Organisation accepted Israel's right to exist, is also considered an implied recognition of Israel. When Hamas, in an attempt to break international isolation, declared that it would respect international resolutions despite its refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist, al-Zawahiri characterised the difference between the two formulations as semantic. If anything, al-Zawahiri argued, 'respect' shows higher esteem than 'recognition'.²⁴

Similarly, al-Qaeda considered the formation of a Palestinian national-unity government a capitulation to Israel. Al-Zawahiri harshly criticised

Hamas for selling out Palestine 'for a third of the cabinet with a fourth of sovereignty and a tenth of a homeland'. He stated that for a minority of positions in a government that does not control the borders of Palestine and whose members cannot even move between the West Bank and Gaza without Israel's permission, Hamas had abandoned sharia, ceded most of historical Palestine and ceased its military resistance.²⁵ When the government collapsed and Hamas took over Gaza, al-Qaeda, seeing an opportunity for realignment and an expansion of jihadi influence in the Palestinian arena, temporarily moderated its tone and summoned Muslims to assist their 'sieged brothers' in Gaza. At the same time, it called on the leadership of Hamas to discard the Mecca Agreement with Fatah, along with all international agreements that 'stole Palestine from the Muslim nation and handed it to the Jews'.²⁶ All such international agreements and resolutions are deemed, in al-Qaeda's view, null and void and 'not worth so much as a mosquito's wing on the scales of Islam' because they imply recognition of the 'Hebrew state' in the land of Palestine, and the criminalisation of jihad against Israel, thus violating religious obligations.²⁷

Gradually, al-Qaeda moved to directly challenging Hamas's Islamic credentials. When Hamas refused to impose sharia and to establish the 'Islamic emirate of Palestine' after gaining full control over the Gaza Strip, al-Qaeda even suggested that Hamas had violated the obligation of Muslim rulers to act within the framework of sharia rulings. Yet, sensitive to the strong appeal of Hamas among Muslims and the growing criticism of the practice of excommunication used by some jihadi outfits, al-Qaeda was careful to clarify that despite this criticism, it continues to distinguish between Hamas and the secular unbeliever Fatah party.²⁸

The challenge to Hamas's commitment to an Islamic agenda also manifests in criticism of its Palestinian nationalism. Al-Qaeda views all Muslims as part of one borderless umma; therefore, an Islamic movement must not accept any tribal, ethnic or national affiliation because these reflect acceptance of division among Muslims. Al-Qaeda called upon Hamas to abandon nationalism and become a true Islamic movement. Hamas, al-Zawahiri declared, has a stark choice: it may be a local nationalist movement presiding over a small piece of land, separated from the goals of the umma

and engaged in a quest for acceptance by the international community, or a leader in an Islamic jihadist movement that 'seeks to establish God's way on earth, to fight so that God's religion becomes supreme, and to represent the central cause of the jihadist Muslim Nation'.²⁹

The intensity of the exchange between the two movements fluctuated until suddenly reaching a peak in February 2008, when al-Baghdadi ratcheted up al-Qaeda's attack on Hamas to new levels. Al-Baghdadi's statement was unusual; normally his messages were restricted to the situation in Iraq. Not this time. In an audio message dedicated to events in Palestine and titled 'The Religion is the Advice', al-Baghdadi accused Hamas's leaders of betraying their religion and the umma. He repeated al-Qaeda's charges against Hamas but then crossed a red line by directly challenging Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip, first by calling on Palestinians to establish Salafi groups to guide the Palestinian people in preparation for the arrival of foreign jihadis, and then, more importantly, by calling on members of Hamas's military wing, the al-Qassam brigades, to split from Hamas and isolate its leadership.³⁰

Hamas responded with a ferocious statement posted on a jihadi website. It was not unusual for Hamas to reject al-Qaeda's allegations. Previously it had called on al-Qaeda to stay away from the Palestinian cause, rejected its announcements as 'unjustified defamation and attack against Hamas movement and its leaders', and declared its unwillingness to accept criticism from uninformed people such as al-Zawahiri, seen as mere fugitives in the Afghan mountains.³¹ But this message, attributed to a commander in the al-Qassam brigades, was uniquely harsh, suggesting that al-Qaeda had hit an exposed nerve. The statement declared that al-Baghdadi was trying to hinder Hamas's jihad, split the ranks of its mujahadeen and permit the spilling of their blood.³² Moreover, using derogatory language, the speaker labelled al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State of Iraq as 'fascist Takfiri [excommunicators]' and for the first time denounced al-Qaeda for committing crimes against fellow mujahadeen in Iraq. Adding further insults, the message stated, 'your intelligence betrayed you, and

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your sense of honour and your manliness betrayed you. We found out that you have a soul that commands you to do evil.' Most importantly, the statement maintained that Hamas remains united. Al-Baghdadi was declared *persona non grata*, and it was made clear that neither he nor his followers would ever be allowed to enter Palestine.

The furious response appears to have stopped the dynamic of escalating rhetoric. Palestine has remained central in subsequent statements by al-Qaeda leaders, but their appetite for assaulting Hamas seems to have waned. They have presented Hamas's failure to lift the blockade on Gaza as proof that its methodology has failed and that only al-Qaeda's way, uncompromising jihad, can restore Palestinian rights. But in many ways the appeals have repeated al-Qaeda's traditional theme, condemning the failure of the Arab regimes to liberate Palestine and presenting the plight of Gaza as a symbol for the overall weakness of the umma under their corrupt rulers, their agents among the religious scholars, and misguided Islamic movements, normally the Muslim Brotherhood.³³ They conclude that the umma must take matters into its own hands and, through jihad, realise the duty to liberate a Muslim land. Egyptians in particular are urged to lift the siege by breaking down the wall between Egypt and Gaza.³⁴

Al-Qaeda's Palestinian dilemma

Subjected to harsh criticism throughout the Muslim world, al-Qaeda is seeking to salvage its reputation and gain new recruits to save its collapsing effort in Iraq. Becoming the knight of the Palestinian cause, particularly by targeting Israel, could provide it a lifeline and a possible way out of its predicament. For this scenario to materialise, al-Qaeda would need greater presence in the Palestinian territories, but operational limitations do not allow the sending of significant numbers of foreign jihadis into either the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. In Gaza, even if its operatives were to succeed in infiltrating the border, the tight clan-based nature of the strip would make it virtually impossible to operate without being detected by Hamas.

Theoretically, al-Qaeda could draw on local Salafi sympathisers, including Palestinians who trained in its camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas, to lead local Palestinian cells on its behalf. A few such attempts

have been documented, but in general these efforts have had no significant impact. The formation in recent years of Gazan Salafi groups that identify with al-Qaeda³⁵ (although denying any organisational ties with the group) has been equally futile. Some such groups represent families who, in the struggle for resources, found the Salafi stream an available and useful niche. Jaish al-Islam, responsible for the March 2007 kidnapping of British journalist Alan Johnston, is the most prominent among these groups. It has some genuine Salafis in its ranks, but its core comprises members of the Dugmush clan, known for many years for its criminal activities and inclination to shift alliances. As part of Hamas's efforts to consolidate its position in Gaza, in 2008 it clamped down on Jaish al-Islam, sending a strong signal that it would not tolerate challenges to its rule.

Hamas's cooperation is therefore critical to al-Qaeda's desire to use the Palestinian struggle to rehabilitate its image. But al-Qaeda's repeated criticism of the popular Hamas is unlikely to attract new followers or encourage Hamas to collaborate with it. The rhetorical duel further illustrates how jihadi groups' doctrinal rigidity can trump operational needs, as well as their injudicious ability to produce new enemies before beating old ones.

In the face of these difficulties, al-Qaeda chose a riskier strategy that is guaranteed to alienate Hamas even further. It has opted for the 'off-the-shelf' option – converting Hamas forces into a jihadi outfit by encouraging members of Hamas's military wing to switch sides to al-Qaeda, providing an already-trained force within the Palestinian territories. Al-Qaeda is aware of the internal schism within Hamas and its radical wing's dissatisfaction with the movement's willingness to suspend or reduce the resistance to Israel while consolidating its control of Gaza and pushing to take over the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Al-Qaeda believes this conflict may make some among Hamas's military wing amenable to defection to maintain the violent struggle.³⁶ Moreover, experience from other fronts reveals that many young fighters, untrained for other, respectable jobs, are attached to the continuation of conflict, which offers them a source of income and social status.

Some anecdotal evidence suggests that a few Hamas members have been responsive to al-Qaeda's calls.³⁷ However, despite al-Qaeda's proclamation

that some Hamas members have already left the party and formed independent jihadi groups, and that many more remain Hamas members in name only,³⁸ it is difficult to conclude that the strategy of dividing Hamas is bearing fruit. Hamas is a disciplined organisation, and its forces are unlikely to defect in droves to join al-Qaeda's ranks. But as Hamas's strong reaction to al-Baghdadi's message shows, it does not take lightly al-Qaeda's attempts to split it.

In sum, despite its plans and promises, al-Qaeda is still far from able to secure a central position in the Palestinian arena, or to present a real challenge to Israel. It encourages the creation of local jihadi groups, but is not ready to confidently stand behind any of them as its Palestinian franchise. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's inflexible doctrine has provoked a confrontation with Hamas, resulting in the adoption of a strategy that has little prospect for success but is assured to lead to extra measures by Hamas to prevent the ascendance of any jihadi group in the Gaza Strip. As long as Hamas exerts a commanding control in Gaza, it appears unlikely that al-Qaeda's salvation will come on the Palestinian front.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Craig Borowiak, Nimrod Hurvitz, Kfir Isaac, Peter Katzenstein, Mordechai Keidar, Anat Kurz, Ephraim Lavie, Shaul Mishal, Gideon Rose, Yoram Schweitzer, Avraham Sela, and his research assistant Nicholas Sher.

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- ³ Osama bin Laden, 'A Message to Our People in Iraq', 23 October 2007. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of statements by members of al-Qaeda and Hamas have been provided by Open Source Center.
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