

# MES insights

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## EXCOMMUNICATING HAMAS

*Why Differences between Globalist and Nationalist  
Armed Islamist Groups Matter*

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Following the brazen surprise attack on 7 October 2023 from Gaza into southern Israel, which was spearheaded by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), together with other much smaller Gaza-based armed groups, there has been a concerted messaging campaign backed by the Israeli government and its supporters to link Hamas with Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>1</sup> This campaign involves an extensive advertising campaign on social media sites such as YouTube and X (formerly known as Twitter) using, on the latter, the hashtag #HamasisISIS, which has been promoted by Israeli government officials as well as by pro-Israel activists.<sup>2</sup> Supporters of the “HamasisISIS” and “Hamas = ISIS” slogans argue that the two organizations share the “same tactics,” perpetrate the “same barbaric crimes,” and therefore must share the “same ideology.”<sup>3</sup> Though more frequent in the immediate aftermath of the 7 October attack, claims that Hamas is “the Palestinian ISIS” and/or is indistinguishable from Islamic State are not new; they have been in use for nearly a decade.<sup>4</sup> In addition to being factually incorrect, the conflation of Hamas and ISIS, both as organizations and broader social movements, has the potential to negatively affect strategic thinking and future foreign policy outcomes.

### **A (Long) History of Violence: Hamas and Gaza’s Transnational Militants**

In January 2018, Islamic State’s Sinai affiliate branch, which styles itself as “Islamic State–Sinai Province” (IS–Sinai), released a grisly propaganda video showing a group of its members executing a kneeling man who it had accused of smuggling weapons from Egypt into Gaza to the Palestinian nationalist Islamist Hamas movement. The executioners were led by 25-year-old Gazan Hamza al-Zamli, who, with two of his brothers, left Gaza around 2015 to join IS–Sinai using underground tunnels.<sup>5</sup> Al-Zamli alleged that Hamas was an “apostate” organization whose members have left the fold of Islam. His argument centered on Hamas’ acceptance of the global nation-state system and endorsement of Palestinian nationalism rather than supporting Islamic State’s brand of globally minded militancy.<sup>6</sup> He urged Islamic State supporters in the West Bank and Gaza to use whatever means necessary to target Hamas courts, offices, and security forces, condemning the Hamas government in Gaza for its crackdown on Islamic State supporters there, launched in part to suppress armed challengers to Hamas’ own authority while also attempting to improve souring ties with Egypt over the porous Sinai-Gaza border.<sup>7</sup> IS–Sinai, drawing from Islamic State’s political theology, also called for attacks on Palestinian Christian “unbelievers” and Shi’ite Muslims in Gaza. The actual execution was carried out by a former fighter in Hamas’ military wing, the Brigades of the Martyr Izz al-Din al-Qassam (Qassam Brigades) fighter, Muhammad al-Dajani, who defected to IS–Sinai. Hamas officials’ responses to the IS–Sinai video ranged from alleging that it was a “Zionist” production to claiming that IS–Sinai was trying to prevent Hamas from obtaining weapons so it would be unable to “resist the Israeli occupation.”<sup>8</sup>

The January 2018 execution was part of a much longer history of animus between Hamas and Gazan militants with affinities to al-Qaeda and Islamic State and its precursors.<sup>9</sup> Hamas security forces and the Qassam Brigades have long sought to suppress the independent globally focused militant groups attracted to both al-Qaeda and Islamic State. In August 2009, the Ga-

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za-based militant group Jund Ansar Allah declared the formation of an “Islamic Emirate in the Environs of Jerusalem.” This group was led by Gazan Salafi preacher Abd al-Latif Musa, known as “Abu Nur al-Maqdisi,” head of the Ibn Taymiyya Mosque in the southern Gazan city of Rafah, and military commander Khalid Banat, who claimed to have experience as a foreign fighter.<sup>10</sup> This declaration, coupled with Jund Ansar Allah’s stockpiling of weapons, led to hours-long clashes between it and Hamas police and Qassam Brigades forces, during which 26 people were killed, including Musa and Banat along with 14 other Jund Ansar Allah members.<sup>11</sup> Jund Ansar Allah’s provocative declaration of an “Islamic emirate” in Gaza included a call for all Palestinian armed groups to join it and led to a massive show of force by the Hamas government, which deployed its police, other security forces, and the Qassam Brigades.<sup>12</sup>

### Globalist Militants Condemn Hamas

Hamas’ suppression of Jund Ansar Allah and other Gazan armed groups sympathetic to al-Qaeda Central and transnational jihadism led to its being widely condemned by al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Somalia’s al-Shabaab, and what was then the Islamic State of Iraq, which, between 2013 and 2014, changed its name first to the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and then to just Islamic State. These groups all issued eulogies for Musa and the other Jund Ansar Allah members killed in Rafah. Hamas had previously been vociferously condemned by al-Qaeda founding leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri for participating in the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections.<sup>13</sup> By participating in the democratic electoral process, Hamas was deemed to be guilty of endorsing the “religion” of democracy over Islam because, in theory, in a democratic system the majority can elect to contravene “God’s rule and his law.”<sup>14</sup>

In 2014, IS-Sinai was formed by members of relatively small Gaza- and Sinai-based armed Islamist groups, chief among them Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, following calls by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for all armed Sunni Islamist groups to join his self-proclaimed “caliphate.” In June 2015, Islamic State’s media department released a video featuring Syria-based Palestinian militants lambasting Hamas for not sufficiently ruling by “God’s (Islamic) law” and vowing to destroy not only Israel but also Fatah, Hamas, and “all of the [Palestinian] secularists.”<sup>15</sup> In the aftermath of the 7 October attack, Islamic State has remained hostile to Hamas, despite the fanfare with which the attack and ongoing conflict have been met by al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates.<sup>16</sup> This hostility continues the contested history of the position of the Palestinian nationalist cause and the political symbol of Palestine within Sunni global jihadi circles, the tension stemming from Palestinian nationalism’s, even in its Islamist forms, primarily local character.<sup>17</sup>

### Islamic State’s Indictment of Hamas

What is most galling to Islamic State and other globalist jihadis is

Hamas’ acceptance of nationalism and modern political systems and processes, including elections; its willingness to grant all Palestinians, at least in theory, equal rights as citizens in a Palestinian state; and its acknowledgement that Islamic law (*shari’a*) by itself is insufficient for governance and needs to be supplemented by other sets of rules, regulations, and legislative and administrative processes because it is a set of principles rather than a fully formed legal code.<sup>18</sup> Though there are internal differences and debates within Hamas about politics and the shape of a future independent state, the organization’s leaders, both past and present, have been profoundly influenced by Western political thought and philosophy in addition to Islamic scriptural, legal, and other texts.<sup>19</sup> Hamas leaders are also not ashamed of acknowledging these influences, which global jihadis allege proves the Palestinian group’s “un-Islamic” identity.<sup>20</sup>

Selectively citing Qur’anic verses, *hadith*, and Islamic theological and juridical texts, Islamic State levels several main charges against Hamas that its ideologues allege nullify the Palestinian group’s “Islamic” identity entirely.<sup>21</sup> Like al-Qaeda, Islamic State asserts that Hamas’ “religion and doctrine” is democracy, which contradicts the essence of Islam because, according to ISIS, democracy is a system through which God’s injunctions can be circumscribed or even set aside entirely through popular vote.<sup>22</sup> Islamic States argues that, Hamas, by embracing democratic processes and institutions, including elections—even if done out of self-interest—governs through “unbelieving [un-Islamic] internationalist and local/customary laws” that contravene “God’s law.”<sup>23</sup> These “unbelieving” laws are written, amended, and implemented by a “polytheistic parliament” (referring to the Hamas-controlled parliament in Gaza) and go against Islamic State’s belief that man-made legislation and systems of government are “un-Islamic.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than being guided by the Qur’an as God’s revelation and guidance to humankind and by the example and traditions of the prophet Muhammad, Hamas obstructs the implementation of “true” *shari’a* and actively prevents others from abiding by their edicts, which include, according to ISIS, imposing a poll tax on non-Muslims and killing unbelievers.<sup>25</sup>

Islamic State, like al-Qaeda and its supporters before it, also highlights Hamas’ alliance with Iran and other “apostate, tyrannical (un-Islamic)” governments.<sup>26</sup> During the height of Islamic State’s battles with al-Qaeda Central and its regional affiliates, ISIS’s then-spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani accused al-Zawahiri and other post-bin Laden al-Qaeda leaders of preventing attacks on Iran and its Shi’ite Muslim allies, whom Islamic State derogatorily refers to as “those who reject ‘true’ Islam.”<sup>27</sup> Beyond the political alliance between Hamas and Iran, Islamic State condemns the Palestinian group for helping to legitimize, in terms of its “Islamic” credentials, the Iranian regime and, more importantly, Shi’ite Islam more broadly. Since the founding of its precursor organization, Jama’at Tawhid wal-Jihad (Group of Absolute Monotheism and Jihad) and al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers/Iraq, by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the early 2000s, Islamic State has a long

history of violent sectarianism and rejection of Shi'ism.<sup>28</sup> Hamas' cooperation with the Egyptian government in cracking down on IS-Sinai (referred to as "the monotheists") is also presented by ISIS as evidence of the Palestinian group's perfidy.<sup>29</sup>

## Differences that Matter

Differences between Hamas and Islamic State, as well as between Hamas and al-Qaeda, are clear in the realms of theology, politics, and praxes. Ideology is ever-evolving at both the organizational and individual levels, and its role in influencing behavior is complex rather than straightforward.<sup>30</sup> Political and social context is vital for understanding how organizational and individual ideology and ideological motivations are shaped and evolve as well as why there are often differences between ideological pronouncements, including in the textual output of different types of Islamist groups, and organizational/individual behavior.<sup>31</sup>

Proponents of the view that Hamas and the Islamic State are "the same" tend to point to the groups' use of violence, especially Hamas' 7 October violent attack on Israel. However, even in their approach and use of political violence, the two groups differ notably in how they seek to justify and frame it. ISIS casts its use of violence as being part of a global political and military campaign to impose, by force, a transnational "Islamic state," which the group's leaders and ideologues claim to be a new "caliphate." Hamas ties its violence to nationalism and holds that its use is necessary to achieve political independence and Palestinian statehood. The two groups also differ in how they portray violence in their media operations and discourse. Far from shying away from culpability, Islamic State fully embraces and publicly broadcasts its enactment of often grotesque forms of violence including beheadings, drownings, immolation, and torture. In contrast, despite carrying out suicide bombings and other types of terroristic attacks against civilians on and before 7 October, Hamas has fluctuated between outright denial and obfuscation regarding abuses committed by its members on that day.<sup>32</sup> This may be due to Hamas leaders' understanding the political and public relations costs of abuses against civilians perpetrated by the Qassam Brigades as they maneuver on the world stage. This also differs markedly from Islamic State's full-throated braggadocio about its own violence against civilians and other war crimes.

Though both Hamas and Islamic State draw selectively on Islamic scripture and historical, legal, political, and philosophical texts, they see the role of religion in state-building and governance in profoundly different ways. Recognizing these differences is important to understanding these organizations and the broader social movements and constituencies that support and sustain them. This can in turn aid in the development and refinement of foreign policy approaches toward them, including diplomatic and security assessments regarding the different challenges and potential threats they pose.

## ENDNOTES

1. See Shlomo Brom, "The War in Gaza," *MES Insights* 14, no. 5 (October 2023).
2. Ofir Gendelman, the current spokesman to the Arab world and media in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office, is one Israeli government official who has used the hashtag. See Ofir Gendelman (@ofirgendelman), "Here Is a Message from Arab IDF Soldiers to the Hamas-ISIS Terrorists in Gaza: 'We are coming for you!'," X, 13 November 2023. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman Daniel Hagari also claimed that "Hamas is ISIS" in a televised news conference immediately following the 7 October attack. See Ruth Marks Eglash, "Videos of Hamas Brutality toward Israelis Eerily Reminiscent of ISIS Tactics," Fox News, 8 October 2023. Prime Minister Netanyahu even claimed, in a telephone call to U.S. president Joseph R. Biden Jr., that Hamas was "worse than ISIS." See "Israel's Netanyahu Calls President Biden, Compares Hamas Attack to ISIS," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 October 2023. Netanyahu made the comparison again in a press conference on 17 October alongside Romanian prime minister Marcel Ciolacu, this time comparing Hamas to the "Da'esh caliphate." See "Netanyahu: 'The Civilized World Should Unite behind Israel,'" NBC News, 17 October 2023.
3. Israel's Foreign Affairs Ministry, "Hamas=ISIS," YouTube, 24 October 2023; and Israel's Foreign Affairs Ministry, "Hamas Murdered over 1200 Innocent Children, Women, Men and Elderly," YouTube, 11 October 2023.
4. Israel's Foreign Affairs Ministry, "Hamas is ISIS-ISIS is Hamas," YouTube, 25 August 2014; and Israel's Foreign Affairs Ministry, "Hamas is the Palestinian ISIS," YouTube, 26 May 2021.
5. Iyad Abuhweila and Isabel Kershner, "ISIS Declares War on Hamas, and Gaza Families Disown Sons in Sinai," *New York Times*, 10 January 2018.
6. Islamic State-Sinai Province Media Department, "Millat Ibrahim [Abraham's Community]," 3 January 2018.
7. Morris Loveday, "ISIS in Sinai Urges Attacks on Hamas," *Washington Post*, 5 January 2018.
8. Abuhweila and Kershner, "ISIS Declares War on Hamas."
9. "Factbox: Al Qaeda-inspired Groups in Hamas-ruled Gaza," Reuters, 30 December 2011.
10. Jund Ansar Allah, "Declaration of Loyalty to the Islamic Emirate in the Environs of Jerusalem," 15 August 2009.
11. Al Mezan, "OPT: 26 Die in Rafah Clashes-Al Mezan Calls for Appropriate Measures to Be Taken to Prevent Repetition of Such Incidents and Investigation into High Casualty Figures," ReliefWeb, 16 August 2009; and Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Six Killed in Clashes at Gaza Mosque," Reuters, 14 August 2009.
12. Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Hamas Asserts Power in Gaza after Qaeda Clash," Reuters, 16 August 2009. Hamas leaders also seem to have recognized the danger of allowing Jund Ansar Allah and other groups with affinities for al-Qaeda and globalist ideas to go unchecked, in part because of the attractiveness of these ideas to some within the Qassam Brigades as well as other Palestinian armed groups in Gaza, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees' armed wing, the al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades. The author has documented several cases of Jund Ansar Allah members belonging to multiple groups, including the Qassam Brigades, PIJ, and the al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades.
13. Ayman al-Zawahiri was among the most outspoken critics of Hamas' decision to participate in the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, with al-Qaeda Central's media department releasing multiple messages condemning Hamas. Representative al-Qaeda Central media releases include Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Palestine Is Our Concern and the Concern of Every Muslim," Al-Sahab Media Foundation, 11 March

- 2007; “Al-Sahab’s Third Meeting with Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri,” Al-Sahab Media Foundation, 5 May 2007; and Osama bin Laden, “O’ People of Islam,” Al-Sahab Media Foundation, 24 April 2006.
14. The most well-known Sunni jihadi ideologue to make the argument that democracy is an alternate religion that goes against the tenets of Islam is Abu Muhammad al-Maqqadi. In the early 1990s, he wrote a book, *Democracy Is a Religion*, on the topic. On al-Maqqadi, see Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqqadi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
  15. “A Message to Our People in Jerusalem,” Islamic State–Aleppo Province, 30 June 2015; and “Islamic State Threatens to Topple Hamas in Gaza Strip in Video Statement,” Reuters, 30 June 2015. The Palestinian foreign fighters in the video specifically mention Hamas’ August 2009 crackdown on Jund Ansar Allah at the Ibn Taymiyyah Mosque in Rafah.
  16. Cole Bunzel, “Gaza and Global Jihad: Why the Hamas-Israel War Is Unlikely to Revive ISIS and al Qaeda,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2 November 2023.
  17. Globalist Sunni jihadi figures hold differing views on how central the Palestinian/Palestine cause is to their broader political program and goals, ranging from seeing it as a central mobilizing cause to downplaying its importance. See Bunzel, “Gaza and Global Jihad”; and *Die Welt des Islams* 53, no. 3–4 (2013), in particular Thomas Hegghammer and Joas Wagemakers, “The Palestine Effect: The Role of Palestinians in the Transnational Jihad Movement,” 281–314.
  18. Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 57–63. Nationalism is also defined as being an integral part of the organization’s “religious creed” in both Hamas’ 1988 and 2017 charters. On its website, Hamas describes itself as a “Palestinian nationalist movement.” See “Who We Are,” Hamas, accessed 11 July 2017.
  19. Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, 68–74.
  20. Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, 68–74; and Arif Rafiq, “Inside Hamas: Between Politics and Violence,” *Globely News* (podcast), 3 November 2023.
  21. *Hadith* are reports about what Islam’s founder, the prophet Muhammad, reportedly said and did. They include both sayings and actions of a legal nature as well as on more mundane, daily life topics. Islamic State is particularly wedded to the ideas espoused by the eighteenth-century Arabian Sunni Muslim preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who held that only he and his followers were following Islam correctly and that all other Muslims had fallen into unbelief (*kufri*). On his theology and the movement that grew around it, see Cole M. Bunzel, *Wahhabism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023); and David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009).
  22. Islamic State, *Al-Naba* (newsletter) 113 (January 2018), 12; hereafter *Al-Naba* 113.
  23. *Al-Naba* 113, 12. In Islamic religious usage, the Arabic terms *taghut* and its adjectival forms *taghuti/taghutiyya* refer to anything worshipped in place of the one Abrahamic god (*Allah*). God’s oneness and Islamic theology’s rejection of polytheism and the Christian concept of the Trinity, is found throughout the Qur’an and corpus of *hadith*. See, for example, Qur’an chapters 1 and 112.
  24. *Al-Naba* 113, 12. Though framed as historically and religiously authentic, the theological and political positions espoused by Islamic State and al-Qaeda include significant interpretive innovations that are profoundly shaped by the modern global nation-state system, post-Enlightenment thought, and political order. See John Kelsay, “Islamist Movements and Shari’a Reasoning,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 2 (2009): 121–34; Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Mark Juergensmeyer, “Rethinking the Secular and Religious Aspects of Violence,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 185–203.
  25. *Al-Naba* 113, 12.
  26. *Al-Naba* 113, 12.
  27. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “Apologies, O’ Amir of Al-Qaeda,” Al-Furqan Media Foundation (Islamic State), 11 May 2014.
  28. Christopher Anzalone, “In the Shadow of the Islamic State: Shi’i Responses to Sunni Jihadist Narratives in a Turbulent Middle East,” in *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State’s Global Battle of Ideas*, ed. Simon Staffell and Akil N. Awan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 157–82; and Christopher Anzalone, “Refighting the Past in the Present: Modern Conflicts and the Mobilizing and Contesting of Sacred History,” *Maydan* (George Mason University), 17 November 2016.
  29. *Al-Naba* 113, 12.
  30. Jeroen Gunning, “Critical Reflections on the Relationship between Ideology and Behaviour,” in *Contextualising Jihadi Thought*, ed. Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Kazmi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 219–42; and Livia Isabella Schubiger and Matthew Zelina, “Ideology in Armed Groups,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 4 (2017), 948–52.
  31. Erik Skare, “Texts or Praxes: How Do We Best Understand Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad after October 7?,” *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 10 (October/November 2023); and Gunning, “Critical Reflections on the Relationship between Ideology and Behaviour.” Both Skare and Gunning explain why relying primarily on Hamas’ organizational charters is of limited use in understanding and predicting the organization’s behavior.
  32. Feras Kilani, “Hamas Leader Refuses to Acknowledge Killing of Civilians in Israel,” BBC, 7 November 2023; and “Hamas Official Says Group ‘Well Aware’ of Consequences of Attack on Israel, Palestinian Liberation Comes with ‘Sacrifices’,” *Arab News*, 20 October 2023. For analysis of the use of suicide attacks in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see Mohammed M. Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006).