

closure because figures central to the network's functioning have sought safe haven in Pakistan.

Many in India's intelligence services fear that the recent bombings in Pune in February 2010, Bangalore in April 2010, as well as the abortive attack in Deloitte in Hyderabad in May 2010 herald the coming of a renewed wave of jihadist violence intended to undermine the country's economic progress and status in the run-up to the high-profile Commonwealth Games, which will be held in New Delhi in October 2010. Whether or not Riyaz Shahbandri's so-called Karachi Project is a new endeavor or simply a name for ongoing jihadist activity directed at India, the country clearly faces a growing problem from Indian Muslims who have become radicalized and are able to seek assistance from Pakistan-based militants.

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## Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat

By Benedetta Berti

IN JUNE 2007, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. Since then, numerous reports have surfaced about Salafi-jihadi and al-Qa`ida activity in the Palestinian Territories. Despite these reports, there is relatively little information on the Palestinian Salafist community and its connection with Hamas and the international Salafi-jihadi movement. This article provides an overview of the characteristics of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Gaza, and it maps the existing groups that pursue this militant ideology in the Palestinian Territories.

The article finds that the Salafi-jihadi network in the Gaza Strip is largely a local phenomenon and it has thus far lacked concrete organizational and operational links with al-Qa`ida or other international jihadist groups. Nevertheless, the network admires al-Qa`ida's *modus operandi*, is ideologically aligned with al-Qa`ida, and in the past has attempted to strike foreign targets in Gaza.<sup>1</sup> These worrying factors demonstrate the importance of monitoring Salafi-jihadi activity in the Palestinian Territories.

### Defining the Salafi-Jihadi Movement: A General Framework

Salafism, an Islamist revivalist movement within Sunni Islam, is not an entirely new phenomenon in Gaza. Non-violent Salafist organizations, focused on social work and proselytism, first emerged in the early 1980s under the guidance of clerics such as Shaykh Salim Sharab. Many of these clerics studied in Saudi Arabia before returning home to the Palestinian Territories. The movement continued to grow during the 1990s, but never became a mainstream faction within the Palestinian political arena.<sup>2</sup> Hizb al-Tahrir (also known as

Hizb-ut-Tahrir) is an example of this non-violent Salafist trend, advocating the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Palestine while politically opposing the Hamas government.<sup>3</sup>

Violent Salafist groups, on the other hand, only developed in the Palestinian Territories in the past few years. These groups are focused on armed jihad and are globally referred to as Salafi-jihadis—this marks their distinction with non-violent Salafist groups. They mushroomed in the months leading up to and following the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, and their presence additionally increased in the midst of the internecine struggle between Hamas and Fatah before Hamas' eventual takeover of Gaza in 2007.<sup>4</sup> In conjunction with a process of fragmentation within Palestinian society, new Salafist-inspired groups were created both to challenge the internal distribution of power between Fatah and Hamas and to advocate for stronger links between the predominantly nationalist or statist Palestinian cause and the international jihadist network. These groups initially emerged in Gaza and gained strength because of the temporary situation of anarchy and the vacuum of power created by the struggle between Hamas and Fatah. They were, however, able to gain legitimacy due to the ongoing process of decaying secularism within Palestinian society and the rise of Islamist political forces—a trend that is tightly connected with a wider regional dynamic.<sup>5</sup> Despite this phenomenon, the rise of Salafi-jihadi groups has occurred predominantly in Gaza, as the Fatah-controlled West Bank has mostly managed to contain the rise of new Islamist groups while cracking down on more established actors such as Hamas.

3 Reuven Paz, "Salafi-Jihadi Responses to Hamas' Electoral Victory," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 4, November 1, 2006.

4 For some of the first reports, see Khaled Abu Toameh, "Al-Qaida-Linked Terrorists in Gaza," *Jerusalem Post*, February 6, 2005; "Al-Qa'idah Claims Attack on Palestinian Official," *al-Arabiya*, May 21, 2006; Khaled Abu Toameh, "Al-Qaida in Palestine Issues Death Threat Against Abbas. PA Foils Attempt To Kill Fatah Security Chief," *Jerusalem Post*, May 22, 2006.

5 Asher Susser, "The Rise of Hamas in Palestine and the Crisis of Secularism in the Arab World," *Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University*, February 2010, pp. 1, 45-46.

1 See, for example, the July 2008 interview between Salafi-jihadi activist Abu Mustafa and *Der Spiegel*. On that occasion, Mustafa stated: "We have to fight—just like our brothers on Sept. 11... We feel just like al-Qaida and we think as they do." For the interview, see Ulrike Putz, "Compared to Us, Hamas is Islamism Lite," *Der Spiegel*, July 18, 2008.

2 Hasan Jabr, "Al-Ayyam Opens File on Salafi Groups in The Gaza Strip," *al-Ayyam*, May 17, 2007.

Since then, the number of Salafi-jihadi groups operating in Gaza has multiplied, generating a myriad of small organizations and operational cells whose main focus has been both attacking Israel as well as attempting to “Islamize” Palestinian society by force. Although these groups may share with Hamas an interest in conducting jihad against Israel and a focus on Islamizing Palestinian society, the differences between the new Salafi-jihadi factions and the more established Palestinian political actors could not be more pronounced.

First, the Salafi-jihadi groups do not define the “resistance” against Israel in nationalist terms—as compared with Fatah or Hamas—and they instead insist on the transnational dimension of the Palestinian jihad, making their rhetoric far closer to al-Qa`ida than to other Palestinian armed and political groups. Second, the Salafi-jihadi forces are determined to Islamize Palestinian society and to implement Shari`a law by employing all available means, including force; this approach radically differs from both Fatah’s secular agenda as well as from Hamas’ more gradual approach to the issue. Third, these groups are completely opposed to political participation in non-Shari`a based political systems (such as the Palestinian one)—another commonality between these groups’ worldview and the vision of international jihadist organizations such as al-Qa`ida. As a result, the Salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza are highly critical of Hamas’ decision to participate in the 2006 Palestinian elections, and since then they have opposed the Hamas government. More recently, these groups have become even more confrontational with respect to Hamas, albeit lacking the strength to militarily challenge the organization.

The Salafi-jihadi network in Gaza is predominantly composed of self-radicalized Palestinians as well as disenchanting Fatah and Hamas militants.<sup>6</sup> The network consists of

6 “Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas,” International Crisis Group, March 19, 2008, p. 25; Khaled Abu Toameh, “Jund Ansar Allah Group Was Armed by Fatah Operatives, Hamas Claims. Radicals Were Latest In Gaza To Seek Imposition Of Islamic Law,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2009; Kifah Zibun, “The Salafi Groups in Gaza Are Close to Al-Qa`idah, and Have Split from Factions

approximately 4,000-5,000 members,<sup>7</sup> although its alleged followers could be as many as 50,000 people.<sup>8</sup> Despite reports from the Palestinian Authority claiming the contrary, the movement appears to be overwhelmingly Palestinian. Nevertheless, in the past couple of years a few dozen foreign militants, some of them returnees from Iraq, are believed to have entered the Gaza Strip through Egypt to join the local jihadist movement.<sup>9</sup>

#### Mapping the Threat

##### *Jaysh al-Islam*

One of the first Salafi-jihadi groups to emerge in the Gaza Strip is the Army of Islam (Jaysh al-Islam), which gained international notoriety by participating, together with Hamas’ Qassam Brigades and the Salah al-Din Brigades, in the kidnapping of Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of the kidnapping, the group, using an al-Qa`ida-affiliated online forum, introduced itself as a Palestinian jihadist organization waging a religious war on Israel.<sup>11</sup> A few weeks later, Jaysh al-Islam conducted another major operation by kidnapping Fox News journalist Steve Centanni and cameraman Olaf Wiig.<sup>12</sup>

Jaysh al-Islam, created by former Popular Resistance Committee member Mumtaz Dughmush and linked to the powerful Dughmush clan in Gaza, became increasingly hostile to Hamas in the months preceding Hamas’ takeover of the Strip in 2007. During this period, Jaysh al-Islam began to openly challenge Hamas’ authority, leading to armed clashes between the two organizations.<sup>13</sup> Motivated by a

Including Hamas,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 16, 2009.

7 Daniel Williams, “Salafism: A New Threat to Hamas,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2009.

8 Jonathan Spyer, “Al-Qaida-Style Islamism Comes to Gaza. Millions of Petrodollars are Flowing in Every Month to Fund Islamist Extremists,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 20, 2009.

9 Amos Harel, “Terrorists Who Fought U.S. in Iraq Make Way to Gaza,” *Haaretz*, August 11, 2009; “Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas,” p. 26.

10 Michael Slackman and Souad Mekhennet, “A New Group That Seems to Share Al Qaeda’s Agenda,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2006.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Zibun, “The Salafi Groups in Gaza Are Close to Al-Qa`idah, and Have Split from Factions Including

mix of religious and clan politics, and with the intent of emphasizing its capacity to prevent Hamas from ruling Gaza, Jaysh al-Islam kidnapped BBC correspondent Alan Johnston and held him for more than four months until Hamas was finally able to ensure his

**“The Salafi-jihadi movement within Gaza has been growing since 2006, and it now constitutes a loose network of mostly Palestinian fighters who have adopted an international jihadist approach to the previously more statist Palestinian struggle.”**

release.<sup>14</sup> Although the kidnapping was likely organized to embarrass and challenge Hamas, the group revealed its international jihadist orientation by linking Johnston’s freedom with the release of an al-Qa`ida cleric held in the United Kingdom, Abu Qatada. This stressed the group’s ideological proximity with al-Qa`ida.<sup>15</sup>

In the aftermath of the “Johnston Affair,” Hamas cracked down on Jaysh al-Islam’s activities, significantly reducing the group’s size and importance. Yet Jaysh al-Islam continued to conduct internal attacks against “corrupt” businesses in Gaza (including international co-ed schools), and on several occasions targeted the local Christian community.<sup>16</sup> In February 2008, for example, the group claimed responsibility for attacking the YMCA building in Gaza

Hamas.”

14 Ibid.

15 Donald Macintyre, “Tape Provides First Evidence That BBC Reporter Was Taken,” *Independent*, May 10, 2007.

16 “Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas,” pp. 25-27; “Unidentified Gunmen Attack American School in Bayt Lahiyah,” Ma’an News Agency, January 12, 2008; Joshua Mitnic, “Gaza Christians in Peril After Takeover By Hamas; Attacks Against Churches Trigger Concern,” *Washington Times*, June 27, 2007.

and temporarily abducting its guards.<sup>17</sup> While recurrently clashing with Hamas, the organization remains active, and in 2009 it was reportedly involved in training Egyptian jihadists of the “al-Zeitun cell,” an al-Qa`ida-inspired group that was planning to assassinate Shalom Cohen, the Israeli ambassador to Egypt.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Suyuf al-Haq*

A “veteran” Salafi-jihadi group in Gaza is Swords of Righteousness (Suyuf al-Haq). The group’s operations in Gaza date before Hamas’ takeover of the Strip in 2007. Suyuf al-Haq is primarily concentrated in the Beit Hanoun area of northern Gaza. It is supposedly led by former Hamas cleric Abu Suheib al-Maqdisi, who left Hamas to protest its decision to take part in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections.<sup>19</sup> Since 2006, Suyuf al-Haq has been mostly involved in internal attacks within Gaza, aimed at changing the mores of Palestinian society and at “implementing God’s shari’ah and...to eradicate all forms of corruption.”<sup>20</sup> For example, Suyuf al-Haq has been responsible for bombings against Gaza’s internet cafes and music shops, attacks at the al-Arabiya media facilities in Gaza, as well as for kidnappings and attacks against people involved in activities deemed as “immoral”—ranging from throwing sulfuric acid at a woman dressed “provocatively” to attacking a young man listening to music.<sup>21</sup> Moreover,

the group has repeatedly threatened the Gaza-based Christian community. In 2006, for example, it announced its intention to blow up local churches in response to the publication in Denmark of political cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>22</sup> Finally, Suyuf al-Haq has been involved in assassinating its political enemies and is charged with killing senior Palestinian intelligence officer Colonel Jed Tayya in 2007, who the organization accused of being a Mossad agent.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Jaysh al-Umma*

Another major jihadist organization is the Army of the Nation (Jaysh al-Umma), operational since June 2007 when it first took responsibility for firing three rockets from Gaza into southern Israel.<sup>24</sup> The organization, led by Abu Hafs al-Maqdisi,<sup>25</sup> has since focused mostly on firing rockets, detonating explosives, and firing shells at Israel,<sup>26</sup> while largely avoiding claiming responsibility for attacks against internal Palestinian targets.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Jaysh al-Umma demonstrated its interest in international targets during its first press conference in January 2008, when it announced its intention to assassinate U.S. President George W. Bush during a forthcoming trip to the region.<sup>28</sup> This declaration stressed the

group’s ideological proximity with al-Qa`ida, a link confirmed by Abu Hafs during several public appearances.<sup>29</sup> On one occasion, he stated: “For us Al-Qa`idah, Fatah al-Islam, and all those who believe in the Salafist creed are the same,” while however ensuring that the group holds no operational contacts with the international jihadist network.<sup>30</sup> During a separate interview, Abu Hafs

**“The Salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza are highly critical of Hamas’ decision to participate in the 2006 Palestinian elections, and since then they have opposed the Hamas government.”**

also clarified the group’s oppositional stance with respect to Hamas, by stating: “We believe that Hamas does not implement the rule of God on earth, and does not implement or enforce any ruling of the Islamic Shariah.”<sup>31</sup>

While Hamas at first tolerated Jaysh al-Umma’s activities against Israel, it eventually changed its position and reacted to the increased activism and animosity by temporarily arresting Jaysh al-Umma’s leader, Abu Hafs.<sup>32</sup> Since then, the two groups have been reciprocally hostile, with Jaysh al-Umma defying Hamas’ calls to preserve a cease-fire with Israel,<sup>33</sup> and with Hamas periodically arresting the

Group Threatens Internet Cafes in Gaza Strip,” *al-Ayyam*, September 2, 2006.

22 “Islamist Group Claims Attack on Gaza Al-Arabiya Office.”

23 Ali Waked, “Al-Qaeda Affiliate Burns Coffee Shop in Gaza Strip,” YNetNews, October 10, 2006.

24 “New Organization Dubbed ‘Army of the Nation’ Claims Firing 3 Rockets at Sederot,” Ramattan News Agency, June 9, 2007.

25 “Al-Ayyam Interviews One of its Leading Figures in the Gaza Strip: Is Jaysh Al-Ummah the Palestinian Version of Al-Qa`idah Organization?” *al-Ayyam*, January 12, 2008.

26 See, for example: “IDF Troops Kill Palestinian Youth in West Bank, Two New Militant Groups Emerge,” Ma’an News Agency, September 17, 2007; “The Jaysh al-Ummah [Army of the Nation] Brigades Claimed Responsibility for Firing a Qa`qa Rocket,” Ma’an News Agency, January 12, 2008; “Jaysh al-Ummah Claims Responsibility for Sniping Two Israeli Farmers East of Al-Qararah,” Ramattan News Agency, April 4, 2008.

27 “Al-Ayyam Interviews One of its Leading Figures in the Gaza Strip: Is Jaysh Al-Ummah the Palestinian Version of Al-Qa`idah Organization?”

28 “Palestinian Group Threatens to Kill US President – Details,” Ma’an News Agency, January 8, 2008.

29 Ibid.; “Al-Ayyam Interviews One of its Leading Figures in the Gaza Strip: Is Jaysh Al-Ummah the Palestinian Version of Al-Qa`idah Organization?,” “Al-Arabiya TV Airs Footage Of Al-Qa`idah-Affiliated Jaysh Al-Ummah In Gaza,” BBC Monitoring Middle East, September 3, 2008.

30 “Al-Ayyam Interviews One of its Leading Figures in the Gaza Strip: Is Jaysh Al-Ummah the Palestinian Version of Al-Qa`idah Organization?”

31 “Al-Arabiya TV Airs Footage Of Al-Qa`idah-Affiliated Jaysh Al-Ummah In Gaza.”

32 “Jaysh al-Ummah: We Seek Abu-Hafs’s Release Through Peaceful Negotiations with Hamas,” SAMA News Agency, September 9, 2008.

33 “News of the Terrorism and Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, November 11-28, 2008.

17 “YMCA Library Building in Gaza City Blown Up: Another Incident in a Series of Attacks on Western and Christian Targets in the Gaza Strip by Groups Associated With the Global Jihad and Radical Islam. The Hamas Movement, Which Controls the Gaza Strip, Does Not Put an End to the Phenomenon. Attacks on Western Targets in the Gaza Strip: Burned Down School Buses Belonging to the American International School,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, February 28, 2008; “Unknown Assailants Blow up Christian Youth Organization Library in Gaza,” Ma’an News Agency, February 15, 2008; Khaled Abu Toameh, “Gunmen Destroy Gaza Strip’s YMCA Library, Kidnap Guards,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 17, 2008.

18 Yoram Cohen, Matthew Levitt and Becca Wasser, “Deterred but Determined: Salafi-Jihadi Groups in the Palestinian Arena,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2010.

19 “Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas,” p. 25.

20 Jabr, “Al-Ayyam Opens File on Salafi Groups in the Gaza Strip.”

21 “Islamist Group Claims Attack on Gaza Al-Arabiya Office,” Ma’an News Agency, January 25, 2007; “Salafi

group's militants and leaders.<sup>34</sup> To date, however, there has not been a major open armed clash between the two organizations.

#### *Jund Ansar Allah*

Another group, the Army of Allah's Supporters (Jund Ansar Allah), emerged in Rafah at the end of 2008 and was founded by Syrian-born Abu Abdallah al-Muhajir (Abu Abdallah al-Suri).<sup>35</sup> The organization, whose size was originally estimated at approximately 500 men, operates mostly in the cities of Khan Yunis and Rafah in Gaza.<sup>36</sup> According to Israeli security officials, its composition includes former Hamas and Fatah members,<sup>37</sup> as well as a few Egyptians, Yemenis, Pakistanis, and Afghan militants.<sup>38</sup> The group's main operational focus has been striking Israel, and its actions include a failed attack against the Nahal Oz fuel terminal station and IDF soldiers based there.<sup>39</sup>

Jund Ansar Allah's activism has been substantially curbed since August 2009 when it violently clashed with Hamas, resulting in more than 22 casualties. On that occasion, one of the organization's leaders and imam of the Ibn Taymiyya Mosque in Rafah, `Abd al-Latif Musa, announced a rebellion against Hamas and the creation of an "Islamic Emirate" in Rafah.<sup>40</sup> This prompted Hamas to intervene militarily and to kill both Abd al-Latif Musa as well as the group's military leader, Abu Abdallah al-Suri.<sup>41</sup>

The group suffered a serious blow on that occasion, and since then it has maintained a relatively low profile, although it continues to recruit new members.<sup>42</sup> Recently, in October 2009 and March 2010, Jund Ansar Allah resurfaced and claimed responsibility for rocket attacks against Israel.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Jaljalat*

Finally, another important Salafi-jihadi network is the so-called Jaljalat (or Ansar al-Sunna), a loosely-structured group composed largely of former and current Hamas militants.<sup>44</sup> Its military cadre is estimated at around 700 fighters.<sup>45</sup> The group is led by Mahmud Talib, a former leader within Hamas' military wing, and it first became operational in 2006 in response to Hamas' "moderate" stance and its participation in the Palestinian elections.<sup>46</sup> Talib has declared Jaljalat's intention to officially pledge its allegiance to al-Qa`ida in the course of a future terrorist operation, and reiterated its current ideological proximity with Usama bin Ladin's group.<sup>47</sup> In the past, the group has targeted Israel, other Palestinians, as well as international targets.<sup>48</sup> For example, Jaljalat is held responsible for attempting to assassinate both former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair when

they visited Gaza.<sup>49</sup> Within Gaza, Jaljalat has attacked local internet cafes, and it has claimed responsibility both for the bombing of the house of Marwan Abu Ras, a Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council,<sup>50</sup> as well as for the bombings against Hamas' security buildings in August 2009 following the group's crackdown on Salafists in Rafah.<sup>51</sup>

Recently, Hamas launched a massive operation to arrest Jaljalat leader Talib, who was previously arrested but escaped from custody in December 2009.<sup>52</sup> The operation ended with the imprisonment of Talib in March 2010, weakening—albeit not destroying—the group's operational capabilities.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Fatah al-Islam*

More controversial are reports related to the presence of Fatah al-Islam cells in Gaza. The group, active in Lebanon since 2006 and concentrated in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, gained notoriety in May 2007 when it engaged in a prolonged and bloody confrontation with the Lebanese Army, a fight that claimed more than 400 lives—resulting in one of the worst episodes of internal violence since the end of Lebanon's civil war.<sup>54</sup> As early as December 2007, sources within the Palestinian Authority affirmed that Fatah al-Islam militants had infiltrated Gaza, where they had allegedly been involved in the launching of rockets against southern Israel.<sup>55</sup> There have not been additional facts to substantiate these allegations,

Rafah Calm," *al-Arabiya*, August 15, 2009.

42 Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Qaeda Ally In Gaza Defiant, Seeing New Recruits," Reuters, September 16, 2009.

43 "Gaza Salafi Groups Claim Firing Two 'Projectiles' At Israel Agency," Ma'an News Agency, October 2, 2009; Fares Akram and Isabel Kershner, "Friday Rocket From Gaza Kills Thai Worker In Israel; Attack By Jihadist Group Comes As E.U. Foreign Policy Chief Visits Region," *International Herald Tribune*, March 19, 2010.

44 Hasan Jabr, "'Jaljalat' is Waiting to Carry out a Big Operation in Order to Dedicate it to Bin-Ladin," *al-Ayyam*, July 11, 2009.

45 Jonathan Spyer, "Al-Qaida-Style Islamism Comes to Gaza," *Jerusalem Post*, April 19, 2009; Jonathan Spyer, "New Fundamentalist Movements on the Rise In Gaza. Salafi Groups Find Support Among Hamas Militants," *Jerusalem Post*, October 29, 2009.

46 Zibun, "The Salafi Groups in Gaza Are Close to Al-Qa'idah, and Have Split from Factions Including Hamas."

47 Ibid.

48 See "Hamas Steps up its Struggle Against the Global Jihad-Affiliated Networks Trying..."; "Ansar al-Sunnah Claims Responsibility for Shooting at Israeli Patrol Near Kissufim Post," Ramattan News Agency, August 28, 2009.

34 "Gaza Armed Group Says Hamas Arrested Seven Fighters," Ma'an News Agency, May 26, 2009.

35 Fathi Sabbah, "Gaza, a 'Suitable Greenhouse' for the 'Takfiri Groups,'" *al-Hayat*, August 16, 2009.

36 Ibid.; Hassan Jabr, "Jund Ansar Allah: New Salafi Organization Appears in Southern Part of Gaza Strip," *al-Ayyam*, January 5, 2009.

37 Toameh, "Jund Ansar Allah Group Was Armed By Fatah Operatives, Hamas Claims. Radicals Were Latest In Gaza To Seek Imposition Of Islamic Law."

38 Zibun, "The Salafi Groups in Gaza Are Close to Al-Qa'idah, and Have Split from Factions Including Hamas." See also Cohen et al.

39 "Hamas Steps up its Struggle Against the Global Jihad-Affiliated Networks Trying to Challenge its Control of the Gaza Strip. Hamas Recently Used Extreme Force to Suppress Global Jihad Operatives, One of Whose Leaders Proclaimed the Establishment of an Islamic Emirate in the Ibn Taymiyyah Mosque in Rafah," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, September 1, 2009.

40 "Rafah Clashes Between Hamas Police, Salafi Group," *al-Arabiya*, August 14, 2009.

41 "Mideast: Hamas Declares Salafi Group Leader Dead;

49 Zibun, "The Salafi Groups in Gaza Are Close to Al-Qa'idah, and Have Split from Factions Including Hamas."

50 Jabr, "'Jaljalat' is Waiting to Carry out a Big Operation in Order to Dedicate it to Bin-Ladin."

51 Kifah Zibun, "Salafi Jihadi Movement Leader and former leading member of Al-Qassam Brigades: We Will Take revenge on Hamas; Islamic Emirate Will Be Achieved," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 25, 2009.

52 "Salafi Group: Leader Escapes Gaza Jail," Ma'an News Agency, December 25, 2009.

53 "Jihadist Groups in Gaza Declare Hamas to be Infidel. Their Loyalty is to Bin Ladin and Their Bombings Reached the Home of Haniyah," *al-Hayat*, March 3, 2010.

54 Tine Gade, *Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between Global and Local Jihad* (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2007), pp. 27-29.

55 Khaled Abu Toameh, "PA Claims Fatah al-Islam Militants at Work in Gaza, Blames Hamas," *Jerusalem Post*, December 26, 2007.

and the Hamas government has since denied any operational presence of the Lebanese Salafi-jihadi group in Gaza, accusing the Palestinian Authority of fabricating accusations to further destroy Hamas' international image.<sup>56</sup> Even if the Palestinian Authority's reports are accurate, Fatah al-Islam's presence in Gaza has insofar been negligible.

#### *Various Smaller Groups*

In addition to these more well-established groups, there are also a number of smaller, loosely affiliated cells that adopt a variety of front names to perpetrate their attacks.<sup>57</sup> This makes it more difficult to determine with certainty the group behind each operation. Accordingly, a number of important jihadist plots—including the attack at the UNRWA-sponsored festival in the al-Umariya school in Rafah in 2007—have been attributed to “al-Qa`ida affiliates” without being able to fully uncover which cell or group was behind them.<sup>58</sup> This data is still, however, highly significant, as it shows the ongoing proliferation of the Salafi-jihadi movement and the related rise in the number of active groups. As late as August 2009, new groups were in fact still emerging in Gaza, including al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, established with the progressive closure of Gaza,<sup>59</sup> and Kata'ib al-Tawhid, which claims a cadre of several hundred fighters and an expertise in “RPG rockets, kalashnikovs, explosive devices, and mines, but we are trained in everything, including martyrdom.”<sup>60</sup>

56 “Talk About Presence of Fatah al-Islam in Gaza Ridiculous Joke, Exposed Scandal for Those Who Support Embargo,” BBC Monitoring Middle East, January 6, 2008.

57 Walid Phares, “Jihadist Games in Gaza; Western Media Must Be Careful,” *Washington Times*, August 31, 2006.

58 Jabr, “Al-Ayyam Opens File on Salafi Groups in The Gaza Strip.” Also see, for example, “Jihadist Groups in Gaza declare Hamas to Be Infidel. Their Loyalty Is to Bin Ladin and Their Bombings Reached the Home of Haniyah.”

59 Kifah Zibun, “Abu-Hamzah Al-Maqdisi to Al-Sharq Al-Awsat: We Are Not Takfiris, and We Are Proceeding with the Establishment of an Islamic Emirate,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 5, 2009.

60 Roberto Bongiorno, “Palestinian Salafist Cell Leader Explains Anti-Hamas Objectives,” *II Sole 24 Ore*, August 18, 2009.

#### **Conclusion and Threat Assessment**

The Salafi-jihadi movement within Gaza has been growing since 2006, and it now constitutes a loose network of mostly Palestinian fighters who have adopted an international jihadist approach to the previously more statist Palestinian struggle. Although none of these groups seem to have concrete organizational or operational ties with al-Qa`ida, they all show ideological proximity with the international jihadist network, and they have demonstrated a strong interest in targeting international targets within Gaza. To date, these groups have lacked the sophistication and strength to conduct large-scale terrorist operations, either within Gaza or against Israel.

This situation may change, however, if the Salafi-jihadis succeed in transitioning from a loose cluster of groups into a more operationally, logistically, and strategically interconnected network. In other words, these organizations have a limited capacity to coordinate their operations, and their overall effectiveness is impaired by the proliferation of small jihadist cells, the rapid emergence of new militant groups, and the fluid nature of these organizations. The rise of Jaljalat as a loosely structured group represents an interesting phenomenon. It has the highest potential to expand and develop into an even broader umbrella organization and co-opt other smaller factions, thereby increasing its operational strength and effectiveness.

In analyzing the ongoing trends within the Salafi-jihadi camp in Gaza, it is also important to mention these groups' increasingly antagonistic relations with Hamas. In this sense, a clear watershed has been the August 2009 armed clashes between Hamas and the Salafi-jihadis in Rafah. Hamas shifted from an initial tolerance of Salafi-jihadi operations against Israel to implementing a strategy of containment based on attempting to control Gaza's religious institutions, detaining these groups' most radical members, and occasionally cracking down on the operational cells.<sup>61</sup>

In particular, Hamas has become more determined in regulating and controlling these groups in the aftermath of the January 2009 Gaza war, mostly as a

61 Spyer, “Al-Qaida-Style Islamism Comes To Gaza.”

reaction to the Salafi-jihadis' repeated defiance of the Hamas government.<sup>62</sup>

In parallel, however, the jihadist factions have grown even more defiant of Hamas, both by continuing to disregard its calls to maintain a cease-fire and, more recently, by starting to directly target Hamas members and government figures.<sup>63</sup> This attitude has been effectively summarized by Kata'ib al-Tawhid's leader Abu Abdhallah, by stating that his group now aims “to overthrow Hamas and set up an Islamic caliphate in the Gaza Strip.”<sup>64</sup> Although the Salafi-jihadi movement lacks the military strength to implement this threat, its role in Gaza cannot be underestimated, especially considering the ongoing defection of disenchanted Hamas fighters who leave the group's military brigades to join the new, more radical jihadist formations.<sup>65</sup>

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62 For example, by ignoring the group's calls to respect the unofficial cease-fire with Israel, or by openly challenging Hamas' monopoly of force within Gaza.

63 “Jihadist Groups in Gaza Declare Hamas to be Infidel. Their Loyalty is to Bin Ladin and Their Bombings Reached the Home of Haniyah.”

64 Bongiorno.

65 Ibid.