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The Role of Hamas in the Formation of Global Jihadi Networks in Sinai

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- Apart from the anti-Israel propaganda line, the investigation of the attack by Egyptian intelligence found tracks leading in the direction of Gaza. Security sources in Egypt told the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Youm al-Saba* that the Palestinian organization Army of Islam was responsible for the attack. They said that the day before it occurred, there was a meeting in one of the homes of the Army of Islam's leader in Rafah; about 35 activists participated, and it was decided to carry out the attack.
- Egypt's policy is similar to that of Hamas toward the Salafi terror organizations within its territory: the regime views the organizations as legitimate and does not intend to proscribe them so long as they do not undermine the central government or harm its basic interests. Similar to Hamas, Egypt seeks to "tame" the Salafi organizations, put an end to their subversion, neutralize their potential damage to Egypt's internal stability, and subject them to the new rules of the game, which will allow them limited freedom for *jihad* activity without infringing on Egyptian interests or entangling Egypt in direct responsibility for terror.
- Egypt's supreme interest is to alter the terms of the Camp David agreement and enable full Egyptian sovereignty over all of Sinai, including in the military domain. In the government's view, terror activity from the Egyptian border that does not stamp Egypt

as directly responsible, helps exert pressure in Sinai, compelling Israel to agree to a permanent military deployment in the territory and making the demand for a change in the agreement an Israeli interest without Egypt paying any political price for it.

Sinai Attack Triggers Purge in Egyptian High Command

The August 5, 2012, terror attack near Rafah, in which sixteen Egyptian soldiers were killed and seven wounded, confronted new Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi with his most significant security challenge since taking office. The attack's main objective was to perpetrate a mass killing in Israel after commandeering Egyptian armored vehicles (one was destroyed by the Israeli air force, while the other was blown up by the suicide terrorists). However, the attack on the Egyptian soldiers as they sat for the meal to break the Ramadan fast illustrated the challenge that the extreme Islamic organizations pose to Egyptian control of the Sinai Peninsula.

This was not the first terror attack on Egyptian state targets in Sinai. The past two years have seen attacks on police stations in El-Arish in which three officers, three soldiers, and a civilian were killed, and close to twenty attacks on Egypt's gas pipeline to Israel. Twenty-five operatives of the extreme Islamic organization Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (جماعة التوحيد والجهاد) were arrested on suspicion of involvement in these attacks and put on trial in Ismailiyah.¹ Four of these suspects are Muhammad Sami al-Isawi, a medical student; Abd al-Halim Hasan; Ibrahim Isam; and Hasan Muhammad.²

The Egyptian response to the Rafah attack was swift and harsh. After a tour of Sinai, Morsi declared that he would use an iron fist against those responsible for the attack on the Egyptian soldiers. This took the form of a military operation lasting several days in western Sinai, during which 60 fatalities were reported. The Egyptian army has been using attack helicopters after receiving Israel's consent to beef up its forces in Sinai in keeping with the terms of the peace treaty between the two states.

Concurrently, Morsi exploited the attack in Sinai for a shake-up of Egypt's security establishments. He retired the Minister of Defense, Field Marshall Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, and the Egyptian Chief of Staff, General Sami Enan. He replaced them with General Abdul Fattah al-Sissi, who was appointed Minister of Defense and Commander of the Army, and Lt.-Gen. Sidki Sayed Ahmad, who was named his second in command. Morsi also replaced the commanders of the Egyptian Navy and Air Force, offering them civilian positions instead. Several days earlier, he dismissed General Intelligence Chief General Murad Muhammad Muwafi. Finally, Morsi formally announced that he was canceling the amendments to the Egyptian Constitution that were introduced by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) just before his election, which were intended to transfer to the military many powers that belonged to the presidency.

The Egyptian governmental shake-up as well as the cancellation of SCAF's decisions to appropriate for itself powers of the Egyptian presidency, together illustrate that the new Islamist regime in Egypt has emerged with the upper hand in the struggle for power with its

domestic rivals. This is partly due to the fact that it draws its strength from the support of the masses. As the new Egyptian government completes the process of purging the Egyptian Army and security apparatus, it will become more prone to take bold moves in foreign policy. This will have direct implications for Israel, as Egypt becomes more assertive along with Hamas, its strategic partner, on the Palestinian issue.

No Egyptian Condemnation of Planned Attack on Israel

After the Rafah attack, it was noticeable that the Egyptian government refrained from condemning the terrorists' plan to carry out a mass-casualty attack in Israel. Indeed, senior Muslim Brotherhood figures pointed an accusing finger at Israel, claiming it was behind the attack in an attempt to create a rift between Egypt and Hamas. This view was voiced emphatically in the bulletin of the Freedom and Justice Party, the Muslim Brotherhood's front organization.

Apart from the anti-Israel propaganda line, the investigation of the attack by Egyptian intelligence found tracks leading in the direction of Gaza. Three Salafi organizations active in Gaza are regarded as potentially responsible: the Army of Islam (جيش الاسلام), Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (جماعة التوحيد والجهاد), and Jaljalat (جلجلت). All three are ideologically identified with Al-Qaeda. Egypt has requested of the Hamas government that it hand over some extreme Islamic activists suspected of involvement in the attack, and Arab press reports mention the name of Mumtaz Dormush, commander of the Army of Islam, and two other members of his organization.³

Suspicious Point to the Army of Islam

Security sources in Egypt told the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Youm al-Saba* (August 11) that according to the information they have, the Palestinian organization Army of Islam was responsible for the attack. They said that on August 4, the day before it occurred, there was a meeting in one of the homes of the Army of Islam's leader in Rafah; about 35 activists participated, and it was decided to carry out the attack. The sources noted that information on this meeting reached both Egyptian and Israeli intelligence. The perpetrators of the attack were, according to these sources, four Palestinians and two Egyptians.⁴

Documents captured in the living quarters of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan pointed to a direct connection between the Army of Islam and senior Al-Qaeda figures. One of these was a letter sent in 2006 from the Army of Islam in Gaza to the Al-Qaeda operational commander, requesting operational instructions and funding for the *jihad* against Israel.⁵

In August 2006, Army of Islam operatives kidnapped two Fox network journalists and demanded the release of the extremist Islamic preacher Abu Qatada, who is identified with Al-Qaeda and was being held in a British prison.⁶

The Army of Islam's relations with Hamas have had their ups and downs. In 2006, the two organizations cooperated in the operational sphere, especially in their joint attack on an IDF border outpost in which Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was kidnapped. After Hamas' June 2007 takeover of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, the Hamas government cracked down on the Army of Islam as part of a general suppression of the Salafi organizations that were challenging Hamas' rule and goading it to act against Israel in line with its own strategy. A turning point in relations was the Army of Islam's kidnapping of British journalist Alan Johnston and his freeing by Hamas after 114 days in captivity.⁷

The Army of Islam underwent a "taming" process by Hamas, agreeing not to undermine its governmental authority or take independent actions that deviated from its strategy toward Israel. Hence, with Hamas' knowledge, the Army of Islam's activity was redirected at a front outside of Gaza – Sinai. On November 3, 2010, senior Army of Islam activist Muhammad Namnan was killed in an Israeli air force attack in Gaza. The official IDF announcement stated that "Namnan was involved in leading a number of attacks against Israeli targets in recent years," and that "recently the senior activist was involved in planning attacks against Israeli and American targets in Sinai, in cooperation with Hamas elements in Gaza."⁸

Jaljalat

Jaljalat was apparently established after Hamas' takeover of Gaza and is composed of former or current members of the Al-Qassam Brigades, the military arm of Hamas. Some identify Jaljalat with the Ansar al-Sunna (انصار السنة) organization.⁹ A 2009 report by the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) noted that there are different views on how the organization came to be. One claim is that it is made up of activists who broke off from the Al-Qassam Brigades because of an ideological dispute, having seen the Brigades as becoming too moderate at the time of Hamas' ceasefire agreement with Israel from June to December 2008.

Another view is that the group began in the wake of Hamas' takeover of Gaza. After some Hamas activists left the movement because of internal frictions, Hamas struck back at them. They were arrested, tortured, suffered severe injuries (in one instance the gouging of an eye), and upon their release from Hamas prisons they joined Jaljalat with the aim of attacking Hamas and its leaders.¹⁰ Nizar Rian, a member of parliament and commander in the Al-Qassam Brigades who was killed in an IDF attack in January 2009 and was known for his extreme, belligerent attitude, is mentioned as responsible for turning Al-Qassam Brigades activists into Jaljalat members.¹¹

The ISA's report also mentioned that some of the Jaljalat members had undergone military training abroad, and that the organization was involved in terror attacks against Israel. The most notable of these occurred on January 27, 2009, when three explosive devices were detonated against an IDF patrol on the Gaza border near the Kissufim crossing; one soldier was killed and three wounded.

Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad

The Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad organization is active in both Gaza and Sinai, and is considered responsible for the attacks on tourism centers in Taba (2004), Sharm el-Sheikh (2005), Dahab (2006), and in the Al-Hussein area of Cairo (2009). In 2011 this group, which has an extreme Islamic ideology identified with Al-Qaeda, joined other organizations in declaring Sinai an “Islamic emirate” and a staging ground for *jihad* against Israel. As noted, operatives of the organization also attacked Egyptian police stations in Sinai and the gas pipeline to Israel.¹²

On April 14, 2011, activists of Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad kidnapped an Italian citizen in Gaza in an attempt to pressure the Hamas government to free the leader of the organization, Hisham al-Saedni, who is called Abu al-Walid al-Maqqdissi. The kidnapped man was executed during the Hamas government’s rescue action, in which the two kidnappers were killed.¹³

On August 3, 2012, two days before the attack in Sinai, the Hamas government released Hisham al-Saedni from prison. A Palestinian source said this was done on the basis of an agreement by al-Saedni, who has Jordanian citizenship, to leave Gaza soon for Jordan.¹⁴

The Mujahideen

Another important Salafi Islamic organization active in Gaza and Sinai, the Consultative Council of the Mujahideen (مجلس شورى المجاهدين), has also been involved in terror attacks against Israeli targets from the Sinai border. This group took responsibility for the attack from Sinai in June in which an Israeli civilian contractor working on the border security fence was killed. The attack included firing an anti-tank rocket, detonating an explosive device, and light-weapon fire by two terrorists, an Egyptian and a Saudi. In a video about the attack released by the organization, the two are seen observing the Israeli side of the border, studying the planned location of the attack, and receiving instructions for an attack that was to involve hitting an IDF border-patrol vehicle and then infiltrating the Israeli settlement of Nitzana to carry out a massacre.¹⁵

Popular Resistance Committees

In addition, Hamas’ strategic partner in Gaza, the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) (لجان المقاومة الشعبية), has been involved in attacks on Israel from Sinai. Israel blames this group for the attack north of Eilat on August 18, 2011, in which eight Israelis were killed. The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, with access to intelligence sources in Israel, has documented additional attempted attacks by the Popular Resistance Committees from the Sinai border:

- On July 21, 2006, a PRC member was arrested while trying to infiltrate into Israel from Sinai. He admitted during his interrogation that he had been dispatched by a Popular Resistance Committees activist in Gaza to kidnap an Israeli and smuggle him into Gaza as a bargaining chip for the release of Palestinian prisoners. In case the kidnapping attempt failed, he was told to kill the soldier and bring his papers to Gaza for negotiating purposes.
- On June 11, 2006, two PRC terrorists were arrested while trying to enter Israel from Sinai. In their interrogation they admitted that they had been sent to Israel for attacks involving kidnapping and killing.
- On October 5, 2005, three Popular Resistance Committees operatives were arrested who had infiltrated from Gaza through Sinai to Mitzpe Ramon in southern Israel. The three planned to reach Jenin in the West Bank and set up an infrastructure for manufacturing weapons, particularly short-range rockets, and also to take part in attacks against Israeli targets. They entered Sinai through a tunnel under the security fence in the Rafah area, then bribed Egyptian policemen they encountered to let them pass. The three stayed in Sinai for 24 hours, and then an Egyptian smuggler brought them into Israel. When caught, they were found to be carrying a portable disk prepared by Hizbullah with instructions for preparing explosives and explosive devices.¹⁶

According to intelligence possessed by Israel, Hamas itself is also involved, in terror attacks from Sinai. The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center has documented rocket firings toward Eilat that were carried out by the Al-Qassam Brigades in the course of 2010:

- On April 22, 2010, three 122-mm Grad rockets were fired from Sinai at Eilat and Aqaba, Jordan. One fell in the sea south of Eilat, another in Aqaba. On April 24, divers found remains of another Grad rocket about 70 meters south of Princess Beach in Eilat at a depth of 30 meters.
- On August 2, 2010, six 122-mm Grad rockets were fired from Sinai at Israel. Three fell in Eilat, one of them in a drainage pool in the northern part of the town. There were no casualties. Two other rockets landed in Aqaba in front of the Intercontinental Hotel, killing a Jordanian citizen and wounding five, one seriously. An additional rocket fell into the sea.

Behind the two rocket launchings at Eilat was a group of Al-Qassam Brigades operatives. In neither incident did Hamas acknowledge responsibility, and it even denied that the August 2 attack had occurred. The denial was seen as due to sensitivity regarding Egypt and Jordan, which saw the incident as a blow to their national security and economy.¹⁷

Other Salafi Terror Groups

Other Salafi Islamic organizations active in Gaza and involved in anti-Israel terror include the Army of the Nation (جيش الامة) led by Ismail Hamid, which was established by renegades from the Popular Resistance Committees,¹⁸ and Fatah al-Islam Badmat al-Ribat (فتح الاسلام – ارض الرباط).

Hamas Guidelines for the Campaign Against Israel

Gaza has become a safe haven for Palestinian terror organizations, including those ideologically identified with Al-Qaeda and even maintaining direct ties with it. So long as these organizations do not undermine Hamas' rule or damage its interests, the Hamas government grants them freedom of action and sees them as partners in the anti-Israel struggle.

Hamas has set guidelines for waging the campaign against Israel from Gaza. These pertain to all the Palestinian organizations and are aimed at maximizing political benefits from the use of terror. They include:

- Keeping terror on a low flame, as in occasional rocket and light-weapon fire and laying explosives along Gaza's border with Israel. All this is directed both at IDF soldiers and Israeli civilians. The Al-Qassam Brigades generally do not take part in these attacks but subcontract and coordinate with other Palestinian terror organizations. These attacks are based on the principle of ongoing *jihad* against Israel and the assumption that Israel's response will at most be specific and not lead to a larger-scale military clash.
- Strategic attacks from command centers, aimed at kidnapping Israeli soldiers as bargaining chips for Palestinian terrorists imprisoned in Israel. Here Hamas plays a leading role in planning and execution, and it assumes that the gains entailed by a successful operation are greater than the damage from an Israeli retaliation, even an extensive one. Hamas is confident that it can deter Israel from mounting an operation deep into Gaza, and believes it has important backing in this regard from human rights organizations.
- Massive rocket fire against Israeli communities and IDF positions in response to what Hamas sees as any Israeli violation of the rules of the game, such as attacking targets within Gaza (as in a targeted killing) or harming Palestinians and essential values (such as the Al-Aqsa Mosque). The Al-Qassam Brigades takes an active and official part in such barrages along with, and in full coordination with, the other terror organizations. Hamas views this as important for deterring Israel and as not endangering its rule in Gaza, since it assumes Israel has an interest in quickly ending these bouts and not being dragged into an ongoing war of attrition.

- Opening a *jihad* front against Israel in Sinai. Hamas has channeled the Salafi Islamic groups into terror activity against Israel from the peninsula, while taking part itself in rocket fire at Eilat. Terrorists from Sinai have received training in Gaza, and Palestinian terrorists have moved into Sinai via the Rafah border crossing or through the tunnels without Egyptian efforts to stop them. Sinai serves Hamas as a main conduit for weapons and ammunition (some from Sudan, Iran, and the plunder of the Libyan rebels), and weapons and explosives also move from Gaza into Sinai for the terror organizations' operational purposes. The mutual interests of Hamas and the extreme Islamic organizations in Sinai (weapons transfer, training, *jihad*), along with the assumption that Egypt's control over the region is weak and it actually (with its relatively minor reactions) is not upset about terror attacks against Israel, have further encouraged the approach of broadening the front of confrontation to include Israel's southern border with Egypt.

Implications for Egypt

The August 5 terror attack on the Egyptian soldiers was a strategic surprise for Egypt's new Muslim Brotherhood government. In the latter years of Mubarak's rule, Egypt did not act strongly enough against the terror organizations in Sinai, and the revolution that brought the Brotherhood to power broadcast a message of support for *jihad* against Israel. This was manifested in the weak response to attacks carried out from the Sinai border in recent months, particularly the severe attack on June 18.

In the August 5 attack the Egyptian regime avoided condemning the terror organizations for their aim of attacking Israel, instead focusing solely on the killing of the Egyptian soldiers. Egypt's policy is similar to that of Hamas toward the Salafi terror organizations within its territory: the regime views the organizations as legitimate and does not intend to proscribe them so long as they do not undermine the central government or harm its basic interests. Indeed Morsi seeks, similar to Hamas, to "tame" the Salafi organizations, put an end to their subversion, neutralize their potential damage to Egypt's internal stability, and subject them to the new rules of the game, which will allow them limited freedom for *jihad* activity without infringing on Egyptian interests or entangling Egypt in direct responsibility for terror.

Egypt's supreme interest is to alter the terms of the Camp David agreement and enable full Egyptian sovereignty over all of Sinai, including in the military domain. In the government's view, terror activity from the Egyptian border that does not stamp Egypt as directly responsible, helps exert pressure in Sinai, compelling Israel to agree to a permanent military deployment in the territory and making the demand for a change in the agreement an Israeli interest without Egypt paying any political price for it.

Muhammad Morsi has leveraged the Sinai terror attack to demonstrate leadership and boost his standing as the supreme commander of the Egyptian army. He twice visited the Egyptian forces in Sinai, held meetings with the commanders of the army and the security forces, instructed

them on military operations in Sinai, and made changes in the military leadership, particularly “retiring” the head of general intelligence. Morsi does not conceal his goal of purifying the government and the army from officials of the old regime, having recently told his supporters that it is a process that will take time.

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Notes

1. <http://www.elbashayer.com/news-198716.html>
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16. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/article/17863>
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