Al-Qa`ida and Hamas: The Limits of Salafi-Jihadi Pragmatism

By Mary Habeck

IN 2006, THE SALAFI-JIHADI world was rocked by a surprising controversy: al-Qa`ida's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, issued a rebuke to Hamas for participating in the secular government in Palestine. By the end of 2007, after 12 separate statements criticizing Hamas, Usama bin Ladin announced that Hamas had "lost its religion," a declaration that was mirrored in combat between Salafi-jihadi militants aligned with al-Qa`ida and Hamas fighters on the streets of Gaza.[1] During the next two years, both the war of words and physical clashes expanded until the conflict culminated in a gun battle over a Gaza mosque in July 2009. Although Hamas defeated their al-Qa`ida-affiliated, Salafi-jihadi rivals, some observers believe that this was only the first round in an ongoing war.

There are multiple explanations for the friction between Hamas and al-Qa`ida. The fact that al-Qa`ida and its Salafi-jihadi followers are independent from Hamas' control and have attempted to subsume the Palestinian question might be enough to explain the conflict.[2] It is also possible that the conflict is between al-Qa`ida's vision of a global jihad versus Hamas' local jihad.[3] This seems a possible explanation for Hamas' actions, but too weak to explain why the conflict was started by al-Qa`ida-inspired groups.[4] It may be that al-Qa`ida does not want to cooperate with "moderate" Muslims who are willing to use the electoral process to create a state—a statement that seems reasonable, given the timing of the split. A further explanation for the tensions between al-Qa`ida and Hamas, however, is necessary.[5]

Understanding the reason for the conflict from al-Qa`ida's perspective has implications for determining possible future actions by its followers. The leaders of al-Qa`ida rejected an obvious ally for their jihad in Hamas, showing the limits of cooperation between al-Qa`ida and other ideologically similar groups. Al-Qa`ida also criticized the pathway to power taken by Hamas—participation in an electoral process. Al-Qa`ida reaffirmed its commitment to fighting and stated through its actions that it is not amenable to a more peaceful and stealthier method for seizing control of a region or country. The incident shows, in fact, that al-Qa`ida and other Salafi-jihadi groups hold a few core principles upon which they will not compromise even if a more pragmatic course promises to lead to success.

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A study of the fundamentals of al-Qa`ida's faith might help policymakers better understand when the group is likely to take a stand upon principle rather than take the realist route that outsiders might predict. The clash with Hamas has been so intense because it is based on al-Qa`ida's commitment to not one, but four key elements: *tawhid*, jihad, *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), and Islamic land. In al-Qa`ida's view, the leadership of Hamas violated these unchanging constants, took itself outside the religion of Islam, and therefore could no longer expect help from other Salafi-jihadis.

Tawhid

After Hamas won a decisive victory in the January 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, al-Qa`ida abruptly changed its earlier supportive messages for the group.[6] In early March, al-Zawahiri issued a stern warning to the Hamas leadership, cautioning them that taking power was only valid when it was used to establish God's rule on earth through implementing Shari`a (Islamic law). Any other form of government would be a different religion.[7] Bin Ladin reiterated the warning a month later, supporting the objectives of Hamas while stating that it was impermissible to participate in "polytheistic councils."[8] In December, al-Zawahiri's tone was more combative, bluntly asserting that Hamas should never have participated in the elections at all as long as there was a secular, rather than Islamic, constitution in Palestine.[9] In March 2007, al-Zawahiri declared that the Hamas leadership, in signing the Mecca agreement, was now lost; "doctrinal deviation," he said, "has facilitated behavioral deviation."[10]

The abrupt change in al-Qa`ida's view of Hamas is striking and tied explicitly to the participation of the Palestinian group in the elections. Yet what was it about the elections that caused so much consternation on the part of al-Qa`ida's leaders? Al-Zawahiri was quite clear in his first statement that the failure of Hamas to apply Shari`a, one of the

1 Usama bin Ladin, "The Way to Contain the Conspiracies," al-Sahab, December 2007.

2 Yet the Hamas leadership did not initially confront the global Salafi-jihadis active in Gaza and in fact allowed the group to grow for some time—perhaps as long as three years—before taking decisive action. See "Abbas Says al Qaeda in Gaza," *Washington Times*, March 2, 2006; Ali Waked, "Al-Qaeda Affiliate Burns Coffee Shop in Gaza Strip," Israel News, October 8, 2006.

3 Kim Cragin, "Al Qaeda Confronts Hamas: Divisions in the Sunni Jihadist Movement and its Implications for U.S. Policy," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32:7 (2009): pp. 576-590, has a sophisticated discussion of the conflict. Cragin concludes that al-Qa`ida's ideological commitments to global jihad and against democracy explain the conflict, although she does not delve into from where these two commitments spring.

4 For this claim of a relationship with Mullah Omar, Bin Ladin, and Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, see www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefaabuabdullah0609.pdf.

5 Jake Lipton, "The War of Words between Hamas and al-Qaeda," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 28, 2007.

6 See, for example, Khalid al-Hamadi, "Interview with Nasir Ahmad Nasir Abdallah al-Bahri (Abu-Jandal): Part Eight," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, March 26, 2005; "Statement From Al Qaida On The Martyrdom Of Shaykh Yasin," www.jihadunspun.com, March 24, 2004; "Full Text: 'Bin Laden Tape,'" BBC, April 15, 2004.

7 "Al-Zawahiri Urges Hamas to Ignore Deals With Israel," al-Jazira, March 4, 2006.

8 Usama bin Ladin, "Oh People of Islam," al-Sahab, April 2006.

9 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Realities of the Conflict Between Islam and Unbelief," al-Sahab, December 2006.

10 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Palestine is Our Business and the Business of Every Muslim," audio statement, March 11, 2007. See also "Interview with Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri," al-Sahab, May 5, 2007.

pillars of *tawhid* according to the *`aqida* (tenets of belief) of Salafi-jihadis, meant that they were no longer following the religion of Islam. Within the context of al-Qa`ida's particular interpretation of the religion, known as Salafi-jihadism, it is entirely consistent.

Tawhid, the belief that there is only one God and He alone should be worshipped, is the core of Islam.[11] Salafi-jihadis believe a correct adherence to the principle of *tawhid* includes a literal obedience to all laws ordered upon man in the Qur'an and sunna. To rule by anything other than what Allah has revealed, they so frequently argue, is an act of apostasy. Only God is sovereign and only He can legislate or make laws. Following this line of reasoning, democracy is a foreign religion and a form of polytheism. Any Muslim who supports or engages in democracy, including elections under a democratic system, has therefore left true *tawhid* and become an apostate.[12]

It is only through the lens of this ideological commitment that the controversy in 2007 can be understood. In June of that year, al-Zawahiri argued that there were ideological constants in the current struggle and that the Hamas leadership had crossed clear "red lines" when it decided to abandon Shari`a and accept the rule of the majority (democracy).[13] Al-Qa`ida operative Abu Yahya al-Libi's condemnation of Hamas contrasted the infidel religion of democracy with the true religion of God, which was based on all sovereignty belonging to Him.[14] More pointedly, by participating in democratic processes, al-Qa`ida operative Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid stated that the Hamas leadership had nullified their Islam and become infidels.[15]

11 This is why the term is generally translated as "monotheism," although this is a rather misleading rendition of the word. A better translation would be "absolute oneness" [of God].

12 For the best explication of this view of *tawhid*, see Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, "Democracy – a Religion!" available at www.scribd.com/doc/18993155/Democracy-a-Religion-Abu-Muhammad-alMaqdisi.

13 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Forty Years Since the Fall of Jerusalem," al-Sahab, June 25, 2007.

14 Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Palestine, Warning Call and Cautioning Cry," al-Sahab, April 30, 2007.

15 "Interview with Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, General Official of al-Qa'ida in Khurasan," al-Sahab, May 26, 2007.

Jihad

Al-Qa`ida's conclusion that Hamas had abandoned *tawhid* was but one of the charges leveled against the group. From the time of the election, al-Zawahiri and other al-Qa`ida leaders also warned Hamas not to succumb to U.S. pressure to stop violent resistance against Israel. There were two reasons provided for continuing the armed struggle. First, al-Zawahiri warned that "every way other than jihad will only lead us to loss and failure," since attempting to free any place occupied by the infidels through elections would never liberate even "one grain of sand," but would simply smother the jihad and keep out the mujahidin.[16] Far more importantly, he quoted `Abdullah `Azzam to show that jihad had been commanded by God and was an individual duty on every Muslim in places such as Palestine that were occupied by the unbelievers.[17]

Al-Zawahiri's use of the term "individual duty" is exceptionally important, since Salafi-jihadis believe that there are two forms of jihad: the "individual duty" (*fard `ayn*) and the "collective duty" (*fard kifayya*). An individual duty is a command from God, like the daily prayer, fasting, or giving charity, which each Muslim must carry out to avoid sinning. Collective duties, on the other hand, can be carried out by a small part of the community (such as a regular army) and the masses are therefore excused from participation. According to Salafi-jihadis, whenever the Islamic community is under attack or its land occupied, it becomes an individual duty, *fard `ayn*, for every Muslim—men, women and children—to take up arms and fight jihad until its land is liberated. To refuse to do so is at least a sin and might mean that one is not even a Muslim at all.[18]

Al-Qa`ida's rejection of a peaceful solution for the Palestine-Israel conflict is thus absolute, based on both practical and ideological reasons, as is their rejection of a limitation of the jihad to that region alone. A constant theme in al-Qa`ida's messages to Hamas is that the fight in Palestine is the business of the entire Islamic community, not the prerogative of one group, and that Hamas needs to carry out the jihad with all honest fighters (including al-Qa`ida fighters).[19] Hamas should not, as al-Zawahiri said, isolate the mujahidin inside from the mujahidin outside.[20] There should be one battle, with all the mujahidin fighting as one community, under one religion, and against one enemy.[21] More practically, jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and other theaters was jihad for Palestine, and if Hamas limited the war to its small region, the enemy would surround and cut them off.[22]

Al-wala' wa'l-bara'

The vision of a global jihad was related to the third principle that the Hamas leadership had abandoned: an allegiance to other Palestinians above the overall Muslim community. Al-Qa`ida leaders and allied clergy have written extensively against nationalism, emphasizing that Muslims share a bond that is far more important than ethnic or national identity.[23] This belief is founded on a concept called *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), a term used by Salafi-jihadis to describe the love that a Muslim has for other Muslims and, conversely, the hatred and aversion for infidels that Muslims should display.[24] In practical terms, this principle means that Muslims should only ally and work with other Muslims, regardless of

16 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Realities of the Conflict Between Islam and Unbelief," al-Sahab, December 2006.

17 Al-Zawahiri, "Palestine is Our Business and the Business of Every Muslim."

18 See, for example, `Abdullah `Azzam, *Defence of Muslim Lands. The First Obligation After Iman*, especially Chapter 3: *Fard 'Ayn* and *Fard Kifayya*. This book is available at www.kalamullah.com/Books/defence.pdf.

19 Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, "Message: The Religion Is Advice," audio statement, February 21, 2008.

20 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Realities of the Conflict Between Islam and Unbelief," al-Sahab, December 2006.

21 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Malicious Britain and its Indian Slaves," al-Sahab, July 2007.

22 "The West and the Dark Tunnel," Part 2, al-Fajr Media Center and al-Sahab, September 22, 2009.

23 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Video: The Correct Equation," al-Sahab, December 2006/January 2007; Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Tremendous Lessons and Events In the Year 1427 AH," al-Sahab, February 2007; Shari`a Council of The Al-Qa`ida Network in the Land of the Two Rivers, "Islam is Our Citizenship!" at-Tibyan Publications, undated; The Sharia Committee of Jaish Abu Bakr al-Siddiq al-Salafi, "Nationalism and Jihad," December 21, 2008, available at www.theunjustmedia.com.

24 Perhaps the first use of the term, and still one of the best explications of it, was by Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani in his master's thesis *Al-Wala' wa'l Bara'* (London: al-Firdous Ltd, 1992). One of his advisers for the thesis was Muhammad Qutb, the brother of Sayyid Qutb.

their national origin, while refusing to work with, ally with, or befriend non-Muslims, even if they are part of one's family.

In the context of the conflict with Hamas, al-Qa`ida argued that the group should not put Palestinian interests above Islam or work with nationalist groups such as Fatah, and it should not forget that Hamas' true friends and allies are their fellow Muslims around the world.[25] Abu Yahya al-Libi charged that nationalism and Palestinian unity had become the foundation of Hamas' relations and ties, to the point that it was impossible to differentiate between Hamas and secular movements.[26] In a lengthier condemnation of Hamas, he called *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* "in doctrine, concept, behavior, and action" the "strongest knot of faith," and one of the most important principles on which the jihadist methodology was founded. Loyalty meant that the Muslims were one nation, and that nothing connected with the Muslims was an internal issue. Disavowal implied unending hostility and fighting polytheists (as Hamas was becoming) until all on earth submitted to God's laws.[27]

Islamic Land

Finally, in response to Hamas' decision to sign international agreements such as the Mecca accords, al-Qa`ida charged the group with trading land for peace, betraying the cause of the Palestinian jihad. In return, it received nothing from the United States and the international community: the embargo still continued, Fatah received all the aid, and the Israelis were continuing their "crimes" against Muslims.[28] Al-Zawahiri first mentioned this issue in March 2006, but made it a central part of his rejection of Hamas in 2007 when the leadership signed the Mecca agreement, and it was decried by each of Hamas' al-Qa`ida critics throughout 2007. By mid-2007, al-Zawahiri would state that Hamas had given four-fifths of Palestine to the "Jews," and taken away Palestine from the Islamic community.[29]

The fundamental tenet that Hamas had violated, al-Qa`ida argued, was that no piece of land ever held by the Muslim community—not even a grain of sand—could be given to the infidels.[30] One might be tempted to equate this belief with a view of Palestine accepted by Hamas—that Palestine is *waqf* (an inalienable religious endowment), and its land therefore cannot be sold or given away.[31] Al-Qa`ida's views, however, go beyond this interpretation and declare every bit of territory ever held by "Islam" as inalienable. As al-Zawahiri noted, "the recovery of every land which was once a land of Islam is the individual duty of every Muslim. Therefore, as Muslims, we cannot possibly concede to Israel so much as a hand-span of Palestine."[32] By every bit of land, al-Zawahiri meant even lost Andalusia—which he and other al-Qa`ida leaders have consistently described as invaded and occupied Muslim territory—let alone more recently "lost" lands such as Palestine.[33] If Hamas would not change its mind about giving away Palestine, then the group needed to be opposed in order to follow God's orders and liberate the land from the infidels.

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The Solution

The decision to confront Hamas was thus a natural conclusion given the group's rejection of these fundamental principles. Throughout 2006 and 2007, al-Qa`ida had a consistent message for Hamas' leadership: the only way to end the conflict was to return to true *tawhid*, foreswear international agreements that gave away Islamic land, take up jihad once again, and work with al-Qa`ida. At the same time, al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Abu'l-Yazid and others reached out to the ordinary members of Hamas, making a clear distinction between the "honest" mujahidin—at times equated with the Qassam Brigades[34]—and the corrupt leadership.[35]

After July 2007, as Hamas began cracking down on affiliates ideologically allied with al-Qa`ida in Gaza and elsewhere, the tone changed. Now the invective from al-Qa`ida directed toward Hamas matched that pointed at other ideological enemies; guns were turned against fellow Muslims, and there were calls for insurrection by the "honest" mujahidin against the Hamas leadership.[36] In al-Qa`ida's version of events, doctrinal deviation had led to methodological deviation. It was Hamas that had sinned and rejected God: now they would pay with open war.[37]

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25 Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Palestine, Warning Call and Cautioning Cry," al-Sahab, April 30, 2007; "Interview of Abu Yahya al-Libi by al-Sahab Media," al-Fajr Media Center, September 10, 2007.

26 Al-Libi, "Palestine, Warning Call and Cautioning Cry."

27 "Interview of Abu Yahya al-Libi by al-Sahab Media."

28 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Advice of One Concerned," al-Sahab, July 2007.

29 Ibid.

30 "Al-Zawahiri Urges Hamas to Ignore Deals With Israel," al-Jazira, March 4, 2006.

31 See, for example, Shaykh Atiyatallah, "Shaykh Ayman: We Hold Him To Be a Preacher of Right-Guidance and Pure Tawhid," March 14, 2007.

32 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Realities of the Conflict Between Islam and Unbelief," al-Sahab, December 2006.

33 Al-Zawahiri, "Palestine is Our Business and the Business of Every Muslim."

34 The Qassam Brigades is the military wing of Hamas.

35 This is a consistent theme in statements by al-Qa`ida's leadership on the Hamas conflict between 2006-2007.

36 "Ultimatum to HAMAS, Al-Qassam Brigades," al-Sawarim Media Institute, July 2, 2007; Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, "They Plotted and Planned, and Allah Too Planned," al-Furqan Media Productions, September 15, 2007; Al-Baghdadi, "Message: The Religion Is Advice."

37 Abdullah Haidar Shai', "Hamas-Shattering of the Image," Global Islamic Media Front and Dar al-Murabiteen Publications, December 22, 2009.