

4

CRUCIAL
QUESTIONS
ABOUT

HAMAS



DENISON FORUM
ON TRUTH AND CULTURE

4 crucial questions about Hamas

James C. Denison, Ph.D.
President, Denison Forum on Truth and Culture
www.denisonforum.org

"Here's the difference between us. We are using missile defense to protect our civilians, and they're using civilians to protect their missiles."

--Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on Israel's conflict with Hamasⁱ

Sheikh Ahmed Yassin is the Palestinian Osama bin Laden, though few in the West know his name. Yassin was born in 1938, in what was called Palestine under British rule. His father died when he was three years of age. When his family's village was captured by Israeli forces during the 1948 War for Independence, they fled to Gaza, a region 25 miles long by 7.5 miles wide on the Mediterranean Sea, bordering Egypt to the south and Israel to the east and north.

A wrestling accident at the age of 12 left him a quadriplegic. Undeterred, he devoted his early life to Islamic scholarship. He became convinced that Palestine is a Muslim land "consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day," and that no Arab leader has the right to give up any part of this region.ⁱⁱ

As Yassin grew older, he became more frail. He could barely see; his voice was thin and quavering. But he became the leader of a fledgling movement that is dominating global headlines today: Hamas.

Its name means "zeal" in Arabic, and also forms an acronym (spelled backwards) for "Islamic Resistance Movement." Sheikh Yassin began his movement in the late 1960s as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1973, he established the "Islamic Center" to coordinate the Brotherhood's activities in Gaza, and founded Hamas as their political arm in 1987. It published its official charter in 1988, calling for the destruction of Israel and raising "the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine."

Sheikh Yassin actively opposed any attempt to make peace with Israel and the West, stating that "reconciliation with the Jews is a crime." He often claimed that Israel "must disappear from the map." In 1989, he was arrested by Israel and sentenced to life imprisonment for ordering the killing of Palestinians who allegedly collaborated with the Israeli army. He was released in 1997 in a trade-off with Jordan for two Israeli agents. His time in prison raised his stature as a spiritual leader among radical Muslims. The sheikh was killed on 22 March 2004 in an Israeli missile strike, and is revered as a martyr by the movement he founded. More than 200,000 Palestinians attended his funeral procession

Regarding Israel, Yassin repeatedly asserted, "The so-called peace path is not peace and it is not a substitute for jihad and resistance." He condemned the outcome of a 2003 summit that sought to bring about an end to violence in the region. And he promised

young people that suicide bombers willing to die for the Palestinian cause would achieve martyrdom. .

Sheikh Yassin declared, "We chose this road, and it will end with martyrdom or victory." Why are these the only options for Hamas? Why do its members seek to annihilate the Jewish state and its people? Why are they waging a war they clearly cannot win? And what does their movement say about jihadists and America?

Why does Hamas hate Israel?

The charter of Hamas calls for the annihilation of Israel. Their rocket attacks are aimed at the Israeli people, whether military or civilian. Three claims explain such animosity toward the Jewish state and its people.

One: Israel occupies the land of Palestine

Muslims are taught that Abraham offered not Isaac but Ishmael to God, and that Ishmael's Arab descendants are therefore God's "chosen people," not the Jews.^{iv} As a result, many Muslims see the founding of Israel in 1948 as a theft of land from its rightful Palestinian owners.

They point to the fact that the land has been called "Palestine" since Rome renamed it following the Bar Kokhba Revolt in A.D. 132. "Palestine" is Latin for "Philistine," the sea-peoples who lived on the Mediterranean coast. (Note, however, that Palestinians today are primarily Arab in racial descent, with no connection to the ancient Philistines.)

The land has been ruled by Roman emperors, Byzantine leaders, Arab Muslims, Crusaders, Egyptian Muslims, Ottoman Muslims, and Britain. It was called "Palestine" for some 20 centuries until 1948. Palestinians consider the land theirs, and view the Jewish state as a theft and occupation.

In addition, many Muslims have begun claiming that the Jews never had a right to the land. Called "Temple Denial," this campaign began when Yasser Arafat stated at the 2000 Camp David Summit that the Jewish Temple existed in Nablus, a city 39 miles north of Jerusalem, not on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Israelis charge that Muslim archaeologists are actively removing ruins beneath the Temple Mount so as to eradicate any evidence connecting Judaism to the area. Many Palestinians are convinced that the Jews never had a Temple in Jerusalem or historic right to the region.

Two: Allah despises the Jews

The Qur'an describes the Jewish people in highly inflammatory and derogatory ways:

- "And you know well the story of those among you who broke the Sabbath. We [Allah speaking of himself] said to them: 'Be apes—despised and hated by all'" (2:65).

- "They are those whom Allah has cursed; who have been under His wrath; some of whom were turned into apes and swine" (5:60).
- "But when even after this they disdainfully persisted in that from which they were forbidden, We [Allah speaking of himself] said to them, 'Become apes—despised and disgraced!'" (7:166).

Moderate Muslims interpret these verses as symbols or allegory. They interpret them as reflecting the conflict between Jews and Muslims in the early period of Islamic history, rather than as a call to perpetual animosity.

Radical Muslims, by contrast, see them as literal statements by God and as a call to arms against Jews, wherever they live. As a result, Hamas views missile attacks on Israeli citizens as justified and mandated by the Qur'an.

Three: Hamas must defend Islam by attacking Israelis

The Qur'an prescribes three different approaches to non-Muslims. The first, taught by the Prophet Muhammad from A.D. 610-622 while he was living in Mecca, counsels tolerance towards others:

- "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256).
- "To you be your Way, and to me mine" (109:6).

After Muhammad established the first Islamic community (called the "Ummah") in A.D. 622 at Medina, he taught a second approach that requires Muslims to defend Islam:

- "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors. But if they cease, God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful" (2:190, 192).

Unfortunately, toward the end of Muhammad's life, he began teaching a third posture that requires Muslims to attack the "infidel":

- "Fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them. . . . Fight those who believe not in God (9:5, 29).

Moderate Muslims interpret the second and third approaches in light of the first. They believe that the "sword verses" requiring Muslims to attack non-Muslims were necessary for the founding of Islam, but that they are now to be understood as symbolic rather than obligatory. In a sense, they see them as Christians interpret God's command for Israel to kill the Canaanites—necessary in the time but no longer binding for us.

Radical Muslims reverse the order, claiming that the later revelations take priority over the earlier (this is known as the doctrine of "abrogation"). They believe that God calls all Muslims to defend Islam and to attack non-Muslims, using any means necessary. They claim that the West has been attacking Islam since the Crusades, and view hostility

against any Muslim as hostility against all Islam (since all Muslims are part of the global Ummah). As a result, they believe they are required to attack Israel and the West in defense of Islam.

In addition, they see the "sword verses" as obligating attack against all non-Muslims and especially the Jewish people. Since Israel is a democracy whose citizens elect its leaders and serve in its military, Hamas views all Israelis as complicit in their attack on Islam. It fires rockets at Israeli citizens as a defense of Islam required by the Qur'an.

Add the fact that many radical Muslims see their conflict with Israel as a *jihad*, a sacred struggle. Muslims cannot typically be certain of their salvation in heaven, but those who die in a declared jihad are considered martyrs who are guaranteed paradise. As a result, Palestinian civilians who die in this conflict are viewed as martyrs defending Islam.

Hamas thus hides its missiles in civilian populations with less concern for their status than Israel, which views each life as sacred and worthy of defense and preservation. Prime Minister Netanyahu's observation that Israel uses missiles to protect civilians while Hamas uses civilians to protect missiles is an accurate expression of two worldviews in conflict.

What has changed?

Islamic Jihad is a smaller terror organization operating in Gaza. The group was founded in 1979 following the Iranian Revolution, and is sponsored primarily by Iran. Like Hamas, it operates mosques, schools, and medical facilities, but is known primarily for its militant activities.

In June 2014, the group began firing missiles into Israel after a Palestinian teenager was killed in retaliation for the deaths of three Israeli students. Hamas joined in the attack on the Jewish state, leading to a military response Israel calls "Operation Protective Edge." However, this battle is different from those waged in the past, for at least three reasons.

Politics

Besides Hamas, the other main Palestinian political party is called "Fatah" (an acronym for "Palestinian National Liberation Movement"), founded in 1959 by Yasser Arafat. For many years it was the dominant political and military movement working for Palestinian independence. In 1988, it officially recognized Israel's right to exist.

In 2006, Hamas won elections in Gaza, while Fatah retained control of the West Bank (an area slightly smaller than Delaware located on the western bank of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, with a population of 2.7 million). For eight years the two have competed for leadership of the Palestinian people.

Now they have announced the formation of a unity coalition. The U.S., United Nations, and European Union declared their desire to work with this new government. Israel

protested, noting Hamas' continued commitment to destroy the Jewish state. Israel's refusal to work with this new coalition led to a breakdown in the peace process initiated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

Hamas' willingness to work with Fatah was viewed by many as a step toward moderation. However, many of its more radical supporters were opposed to such a coalition with Muslims who recognize Israel's existence. It has been under increasing pressure to attack Israel. When Islamic Jihad began its missile attack, its leaders thus chose to join the offensive.

Rockets

In 2001, Hamas had access only to homemade rockets with a firing range of two or three miles. By 2006, their rockets could reach 12 miles into Israel. By 2008, they could reach 25 miles, bringing the city of Beersheba into range. By 2012, their rockets could reach 47 miles into Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Now their rockets can reach 93 miles, all the way north to Haifa and covering 80 percent of the state of Israel.

The difference-maker is Iran.

After the 2007 conflict with Israel, in which Hamas largely used homemade rockets with little destructive power, several members of Hamas were brought to Tehran, where they met military commanders and experts and were trained in missile construction.

After the fall of Mubarak during the January 25 revolution, the border between Egypt and Gaza loosened and numerous rockets and rocket parts were brought into the territory. For two years, Hamas has been stockpiling these long-range missiles for use against Israel, and has deployed them in the present conflict.

In addition, they now have access to Syrian made Khaibar-1 rockets (also known as M-302t). With a firing distance of 132 miles, they can reach nearly all of Israel. And they have received Iranian Fajr-5 missiles, capable of reaching Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Iran transports rockets by ship to Sudan, then they are transferred overland by networks of smugglers into Gaza.

Prime Minister Netanyahu describes the threat: "Imagine the United States being bombarded not in one city or two cities, but in every city between New York and Colorado. Maybe 20 percent of the United States would be exempt from this, 80 percent of your citizens would have to be in bomb shelters or ready to go into bomb shelters within a minute to a minute and a half max. . . . No country can accept that, we can't accept it, and we'll take the necessary actions to stop it."^v

Tunnels

When Israel began its defensive response to Hamas' rockets, it discovered a new threat: tunnels into the Jewish state. Militants intended to use these tunnels to kidnap and attack Israeli citizens.

One such attempt was made on July 21, 2014: 10 members of Hamas dressed in Israeli army uniforms and boots, climbed through a tunnel, and emerged 650 feet from Kibbutz Nir Am, an agricultural commune founded in 1943 by immigrants from Eastern Europe. Israeli forces noticed that the men were carrying Kalashnikovs rather than Tavors, Israel's standard-issue automatic rifles. The IDF killed all 10, but not before four Israeli soldiers were killed as well. Residents of the kibbutz were ordered indoors for five hours as Israeli soldiers made sure no Palestinian militants had broken away from the group.

Hamas began building its tunnels in 2007 to smuggle goods from Egypt into Gaza. They became a public-works project, employing as many as 7,000 people. Hamas soon began employing them for military purposes as well. In 2006, militants used a tunnel to kidnap a 19-year-old Israeli soldier named Gilad Shalit. He was held for five years, then exchanged for more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

Israeli officials estimate that 20 such tunnels had been created before the present conflict. Israel has been working to close or destroy them, a fact which may help explain Hamas' timing in using the tunnels and its rockets while it can.

What do the two sides want?

In November 2012, after the last Hamas-Israel conflict, a cease-fire agreement was reached in which the blockade of Gaza would gradually be lifted and crossings into Egypt and Israel would be reopened. Due to upheaval in Egypt and continued Israeli concerns about Hamas' militants, the blockade and closed access have remained.

As part of the national unity government, Hamas relinquished some of its humanitarian operations in Gaza, expecting an increased flow of revenues into the area and payment for 43,000 unpaid civil servants. Neither has occurred. In addition, Israel imprisoned 500 members of Hamas in response to the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers. The missile attacks against the Jewish state were in part a protest against these arrests.

Now Hamas has proposed a 10-point list of demands in exchange for a 10-year truce (*tahdiya*) with Israel:

- Withdrawal of all Israeli tanks from the Gaza border.
- Freeing of all prisoners arrested after the murder of the three Israeli students.
- Lifting the blockade and opening border crossings.
- Establishing an international seaport and airport under U.N. supervision.
- Increasing the permitted fishing zone to 10 kilometers.
- Supervising the Rafah Crossing (on Gaza's border with Egypt) and placing it under the supervision of the U.N. and some Arab nations.

- Stationing international forces on the borders.
- Easing conditions for permits to pray at the Al Aqsa Mosque (on the Temple Mount, adjacent to the Dome of the Rock).
- Prohibiting Israeli interference in the Palestinian unity government.
- Reestablishing an industrial zone and improvements in economic development in Gaza.

Israel intended at the beginning of Operation Protective Edge to end Hamas' missile fire and bring stability to the region. When they discovered Hamas' vast network of tunnels, their objective was changed to include destruction of these tunnels.

Now Israel has suffered more than 25 casualties in the conflict, and pressure is mounting to change the status quo. Its leaders do not want a cease-fire that enables Hamas to rearm for the next round of fighting or rebuild tunnels that threaten Israeli civilians.

Some speculate that Jewish leaders may be more open to a Palestinian national unity government that would help police and minimize Hamas' militant efforts. Others warn that any concessions to Hamas would only reward terrorism.

How does this conflict affect the West?

It's easy to dismiss the battle between Hamas and Israel as another example of the enigma that is the Middle East. However, there are at least three ways the battle between Hamas and Israel affects America and the West.

An international war?

At present this conflict is isolated to a small geographical area. But it's not hard to construct a scenario by which it escalates to regional or even international significance.

First, consider Hezbollah. This is an organization in Lebanon, north of Israel, that shares Hamas' desire to destroy Israel and reclaim the entire region for Palestine. Their rockets are far more sophisticated than those employed by Hamas, and would likely be more difficult for Israel's Iron Dome shield to defend. They are sponsored directly by Iran. If they see the present conflict as an opening to attack Israel, the Jewish state would then be fighting a two-front battle.

To this point, Fatah leaders in the West Bank have condemned Hamas' actions and refused to join their conflict with Israel. If, however, they see Israel's ground offensive as an attack on their fellow Palestinians and the people of Islam, they could join Hamas in a regional *intifada* ("uprising"). Such conflicts in the past have raged for years and threatened the larger Israeli population.

Syrian forces, supported by Russia, could join the fray. America and other Israeli allies in the West would rally to support the Jewish state. Saudi Arabia, currently engaged in a kind of "cold war" with Iran, could provide tacit support for their efforts.

If Iran is able to develop capacities leading to a nuclear weapon, such an event would change the entire situation on a global level. Other powers in the region such as Saudi Arabia would want their own nuclear weapons. Hezbollah, Hamas, and other Iranian proxies would have a "nuclear shield" for their militant activities. An international conflict with nuclear dimensions could develop.

A breeding-ground for terrorism?

Radical Muslims have long viewed America as the "Great Satan" and Israel as the "Little Satan." 9/11 was Osama bin Laden's attack on the enemy he perceived to be the greatest threat to Islam. So long as America supports Israel, it is much more difficult for militant Muslims to defeat the Jewish state.

The 9/11 terrorists did not believe they were achieving a military victory against America. Rather, they hoped to turn the American people against their government's continued involvement in the Middle East, forcing a withdrawal that would leave Israel isolated. Alternatively, they hoped to spark an American military response that militant Muslims could characterize as an attack on Islam, rallying Muslims around the world to their cause.

So long as Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS, and other terrorist groups continue to enlist and train militants, America and the West are not safe.

A test of American resolve?

U.S. citizens are more reluctant to intervene in global affairs than at any time in decades. Only 36 percent favored U.S. military action against Syria, even after learning that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons against its own citizens. Only four percent saw such intervention as protecting American interests.^{vi} Only eight percent want the U.S. to send troops to Ukraine.^{vii} Only 19 percent believe America should become more active around the world.^{viii}

If the battle between Israel and Hamas intensifies, this resolve to stay out of global conflicts will be tested. America was the first nation to recognize the existence of the State of Israel in 1948. The U.S. and Israel have been close allies for six decades. How America responds to the current Middle East conflict will say much to our allies and the world about our reliability as a global partner.

Conclusion

The Cold War was ideological before it was economic or military. Two competing worldviews were in conflict—democratic capitalism and socialistic communism. When Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev warned in 1961, "History is on our side. We will bury you," he meant that the Soviet system would defeat and outlive Western society.

A similar standoff is at work in the Middle East. On one side stands Hamas and all who agree that God intends Palestine for Palestinians, that Jews are inferior, and that the West has been attacking Islam and must be defeated. On the other side stands Israel and all who agree that the Jews are God's "chosen people," that Israel was given by God to them, and that radical Islam must be defeated before it destroys the West.

The ultimate answer is a third worldview: that Jesus is Lord, that he loves Jews and Gentiles alike (Galatians 3:28), and that he can reconcile any enemies and make a new family of faith. I pray every day for spiritual awakening to continue in the Muslim world and the State of Israel. Will you join me?

References

i "Netanyahu slams Hamas for using 'civilians to protect their missiles,' *Haaretz*, 13 July 2014 (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/video/1.604852>, accessed 22 July 2014).

ii "Sheikh Yassin: Spiritual figurehead," *BBC News*, 22 March 2004 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1695470.stm, accessed 22 July 2014).

iii The Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimim*) was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. It was organized in Egypt, as an off-shoot of Wahhabi Islam in Saudi Arabia. The MB is often called "the mother of all Islamist movements." It produced Ayman al-Zawahiri, the eye surgeon who is now the leader of al-Qaeda. After winning elections in Egypt following the fall of the Mubarak regime, it was deposed by the military and is widely considered a sponsor of terrorism.

iv It is interesting to note that the Qur'an never specifies the name of Abraham's son (Sura 37:99-106), and that Islamic scholars continue to debate whether the son offered to God was Ishmael or Isaac. However, this ambiguity is ignored by Muslims who hate Israel.

v "Netanyahu slams Hamas for using 'civilians to protect their missiles,' *Haaretz*, 13 July 2014 (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/video/1.604852>, accessed 22 July 2014).

vi Brad Plumer, "Why Americans oppose intervention in Syria: 'It's none of our business,'" *The Washington Post*, 9 September 2013 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/09/09/why-americans-oppose-intervention-in-syria-its-none-of-our-business/>, accessed 22 July 2014).

vii Emily Ekins, "Poll: 58 Percent of Americans Want the US to Stay Out of Ukraine," *reason.com*, 4 April 2014 (<http://reason.com/poll/2014/04/04/poll-58-percent-of-americans-want-the-u2>, accessed 22 July 2014).

viii Warren Mass, "WSJ/NBC Poll: 'Anti-Interventionist Current . . . Sweeps Across Party Lines,'" *The New American*, 30 April 2014 (<http://www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/foreign-policy/item/18163-wsj-nbc-poll-anti-interventionist-current-sweeps-across-party-lines>, accessed 22 July 2014).