افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مبـــاد بدین بوم وبر زنده یک تن مــباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages	زبان های اروپائی

http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/17/is-the-islamic-state-on-the-rise-in-gaza-hamas-israel/

Hamas is fighting a group that's even more radical and violent than it is.

By Gregg Carlstrom

June 17, 2015

Iyad al-Buzm leaned forward against his lavender desk and tried to sound reassuring. “Gaza is perfectly safe. You can walk anywhere at three in the morning,” said the spokesman for the Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry. “There is no Islamic State in Gaza.”

A few hours later on June 11, sirens went off in the Israeli city of Ashkelon, announcing the third barrage of rockets fired by Palestinian militants in less than two weeks. A group inspired by the Islamic State quickly claimed responsibility and promised more attacks. The rockets in the most recent attack fell short, but two previous rockets cleared the border and landed around Ashkelon. None caused any damage.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has grown fond of comparing Hamas with the band of jihadis, which now controls much of Iraq and Syria. After his September speech at the United Nations, in which he called Hamas and the Islamic State “branches of the same poisonous tree,” an exasperated Yonit Levi, the anchor of Israeli Channel 2’s main news bulletin, was caught on camera exclaiming, “Dear God, it’s 45 minutes of ‘ISIS is Hamas, Hamas is ISIS!’”

Lately, though, Hamas is fighting the Islamic State — or at least groups trying to emulate it.

For roughly six months, extremists have waged a slow but steady campaign of bombings and assassinations in Gaza. Their numbers are small, and casualties have been low, but their recent actions threaten to erode the fragile cease-fire with Israel. Hamas has clamped down hard, arresting dozens of people in frequent raids.

Worryingly, these new radical groups are finding support from within Hamas itself, among rank-and-file members who want to go back to war with Israel. Earlier this month, police killed a militant at his home in northern Gaza. The man, Younis al-Hunnor, turned out to be a longtime member of the al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, before he decamped for a radical group.

The defections are further fracturing a ruling party that’s already divided about whether to head back to war. The group’s comparatively moderate political leadership is negotiating a long-term truce with Israel, which could offer five years of quiet in exchange for a major easing of the blockade, even as the military wing busily prepares for another conflict.

“80 percent of the people who are joining these movements are from one of the resistance factions,” said Abu Ibrahim, a mid-level member of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s military wing, the other prominent Gaza faction that has seen defections to the Salafi groups. “They’re angry that the factions didn’t continue the war. They have this idea that we should have no agreements with Israel.”

Hamas came to power after winning parliamentary elections in 2006, and though it has fought three wars against the Jewish state, it has also shown a willingness to negotiate with Israel. This made it a target for militant Salafists, ultraconservative Muslims who see Hamas as too secular and too soft on Israel. For several years, they targeted Hamas members and bombed Internet cafes, video stores, and other “immoral” establishments.

In August 2009, the confrontation come to a head when the leader of al Qaeda-linked Jund Ansar Allah declared an "Islamic emirate" in the southern city of Rafah. Hamas gunmen stormed his mosque, killing him and dozens of supporters. Other Salafi groups got the message, and the violence subsided.

"We've dealt with this '*takfiri*' problem before," said Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas official, using a term for extremists who accuse other Muslims of apostasy. "This is not a new phenomenon."
"We've dealt with this '*takfiri*' problem before," said Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas official, using a term for extremists who accuse other Muslims of apostasy. "This is not a new phenomenon."

But there is one key difference: The older militants, well-known to Hamas, are not involved in the recent violence. Instead, a slate of shadowy, new groups has emerged.

The most active group calls itself the Sheikh Omar Hadid Brigade, named after a prominent Iraqi jihadi from the early days after the U.S.-led invasion. It claimed responsibility for the three recent rocket attacks and issued an ultimatum that threatened more strikes unless Hamas releases Salafi prisoners.

Other small, shadowy groups have attempted to wreak havoc in Gaza itself. A group calling itself the Supporters of the Islamic State in Jerusalem assassinated a Hamas security official outside his home last month and mortared a Hamas training camp. Another sent death threats to liberal activists in December. Unknown attackers also bombed the French consulate in Gaza City twice last winter.

None of these militants have yet sworn formal allegiance to the Islamic State, and the leaders of the self-proclaimed caliphate have not acknowledged an affiliate in the besieged Palestinian territory. But their statements are peppered with songs produced by the Islamic State's media wing and other imagery associated with the group.

Diplomats worry that these groups might start kidnapping people, either for propaganda value or to use as bargaining chips in exchange for jailed comrades. Abductions are rare in Gaza: The last one happened in 2011, when Salafi militants murdered Italian activist Vittorio Arrigoni. Still, the United Nations raised its threat assessment in Gaza earlier this year. Many aid workers are barred from walking the streets, restricted to offices and hotels.

"Everyone knows we have this sort of ideology in Gaza," said Dunya Ismail, a feminist activist who was among those threatened in December. "But this is the first time it [has] happened with an Islamist movement that was unknown."

Despite the breezy assurances of Hamas officials like Buzm, the Palestinian movement is anxious. Police have arrested dozens of Salafists and bulldozed a mosque in Deir al-Balah that was being used by an extremist cleric. Militants who fire rockets are arrested within 24 hours, according to police who took part in the raids.

The Information Ministry has pressured local journalists to downplay the story, and preachers and media outlets affiliated with Hamas have recently publicly attacked the takfiri ideology.

Barhoum and Buzm both stressed that the militant groups are small. Indeed, both Israeli and Palestinian security sources say they have a combined strength of fewer than 1,000 men — no match for the roughly 35,000 fighters under Hamas's command. None of these groups will be in a position to take over Gaza any time soon.

However, these factions appear to have settled on a strategy that could be equally destructive for Gaza. They are trying to bait Israel and Hamas into another war, hoping that their occasional rocket launches will eventually provoke a heavy Israeli response and force Hamas to get involved.

So far, neither side is taking the bait. Hamas has sent messages directly to Israel asserting that it is still committed to the cease-fire. And while Israel holds Hamas responsible for maintaining order in Gaza, its response to the rockets has been purely symbolic: The air force waits several hours before launching retaliatory airstrikes on training camps in Gaza, giving Hamas ample time to evacuate its personnel and avoid casualties.

Gen. Sami Turgeman, head of the IDF's southern command, said recently that Israel would not go back to war over "a small number" of rockets.

Turgeman visited Nahal Oz, a kibbutz on the Gaza border, last month. It was a ghost town during the war, as residents fled rockets and mortars; more than a dozen families still have not returned, preferring to relocate elsewhere. So his message was unusual, given the setting: "Israel and Hamas have shared interests," he told local officials. "There is no alternative to Hamas as the sovereign in Gaza.… and the security situation would be much more problematic [with another group in charge]."

Still, Hamas is walking a fine line by trying to maintain order in Gaza without angering the public or seeming to do Israel's bidding. One group accused Hamas of killing Hunnor, the radical killed by police force, "to satisfy the Jews."

In a mosque in Beit Hanoun, a city in northeastern Gaza, a Salafi imam predicted that the radical groups would continue to find new recruits. The preacher, like most Salafists, is apolitical; he proudly offered a copy of a book he published last year denouncing the Islamic State as un-Islamic. "They reduce all of society to religion, and they do this by taking the blood of Muslims with the hands of Muslims," he said of the jihadi group.

But he acknowledged that many in Gaza disagree. A recent poll found that 14 percent of Palestinians there believe the Islamic State "represents true Islam," compared to 8 percent in the West Bank.

"The culture is such that there are no groups or political factions with legitimacy here," he said. "Groups like [the Islamic State], they can rise in a situation like this, where the crossings are closed, the [smuggling] tunnels are gone, the economy is dead … if the situation doesn't change, we will have a battle here."