

Hamas versus Al-Qaeda

By [Saleh Al-Naami](#)

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

She looked right and then left before crossing the intersection leading to the university. The traffic was being directed by four members of the special forces affiliated with the Interior Ministry, all from Hamas. Gawaher Ghadir, 21, is one of very few female students who doesn't wear a head scarf at the Al-Azhar University in Gaza. Nobody, either from Hamas or the security services belonging to the Hamas administration has ever asked her to do so. And she doesn't think that anyone is going to.

Ahmed Ghannash, who sells music tapes and CDs from a stand on Al-Mukhtar Street, the thoroughfare that divides Gaza city into two, said that he resumed business after Hamas gained power. In the past, unknown gunmen threatened to burn his stand unless he stopped selling music recordings.

Islam Shahwan, police spokesman at the Foreign Ministry, told Al-Ahram Weekly that the attacks on music merchants and Internet cafés are now close to zero, down from about 35 attacks per month in the past. In the six months before Gaza fell into Hamas's hands, an Islamic extremist group calling itself the Islamic Swords of Justice — a group believed to embrace some of Al-Qaeda's ideas — was particularly active in Gaza. That group called for the closure of Internet cafés and music shops. It attacked some of the parties organised at various wedding halls in Gaza and torched some of the educational institutions run by Christians. The group once threatened to harm female presenters working for Palestine Television unless they covered their heads.

Father Manuel Musallam, head of the Latin community to which many Gaza Christians belong, said that his congregation feels more secure under Hamas control. He added that relations between his community and Hamas are very strong. Musallam goes regularly to visit Ismail Haniyeh, who briefs him on current developments.

It is noteworthy that the Hamas parliamentary group includes one Christian deputy, Hossam Al-Tawil. Hamas appointed one Christian minister in its new cabinet, formed one week after the movement took control of Gaza. Haniyeh made it absolutely clear that his government wouldn't hesitate to confront all forms of religious "coercion" and would punish anyone "depriving the people of their right to act freely as long as they did not break the law." The remark was intended for those groups which embrace Al-Qaeda's ideas.

The Haniyeh government and the Hamas movement go to lengths to distance themselves from Al-Qaeda ideology. In a remarkable move, they clamped down on the Army of Islam, the group that was holding British journalist Allan Johnston hostage. The Army of Islam is a clan-based group that acts much like Al-Qaeda. It demanded the release of some of Al-Qaeda suspects held in Britain, including Abu Qatada. Haniyeh's security personnel and the

fighters of the military wing of Hamas encircled the neighbourhood in which Johnston was held, abducted several top aides of Momtaz Deghmesh, leader of the Army of Islam, and thereby forced him to release Johnston.

A well-informed source in Hamas said that the movement's action against the Army of Islam was not inspired by a desire to win international sympathy or prove the movement's credentials. Hamas is simply opposed to Al-Qaeda's ideas. The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that some Al-Qaeda leaders regard the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as an atheist organisation. Hamas, by contrast, sees itself as part of the MB. "Should we allow Al-Qaeda to have a free rein; it would end up attacking us," he remarked.

So it is hard to take seriously President Mahmoud Abbas's claim that Hamas was trying to establish an "emirate of darkness" in Gaza along the style of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Walid Modallal, political science professor and prominent commentator, explained that Hamas follows a middle-of-the-road school in Islamic thinking, just like the MB. One may agree or disagree with Hamas, but it is not a movement that is about to copy the style or ideas of Al-Qaeda. Unlike Al-Qaeda, Hamas believes in democracy and the ballot box and wants to maintain close relations with international and regional powers. Modallal cited the efforts Hamas made to consolidate its ties with the Egyptian and Syrian governments, both known for their aversion to the MB. Hamas has also tried to maintain cordial ties with Russia, despite the events in Chechnya. So why are regional and international powers so dismissive of Hamas? You have to look for the answer in the attitude of regional and international powers, not in Hamas's ideology Modallal said.

Atef Odwan, parliamentarian and minister of refugees affairs in the first Hamas government, told me that Hamas was consistently distancing itself from all the ideas of Al-Qaeda. "It is silly to spend time making comparisons between Hamas and Al-Qaeda, but it may be helpful to note the position of the two groups toward women. Al-Qaeda doesn't allow women to be educated at schools. Hamas, by contrast, has female candidates on its parliamentary list, appointed women to cabinet positions, and encouraged women to get involved in media, political and social activities of the movement." Odwan said that Hamas believes that citizens have the right to act as they please, so long as they break no laws.

Interestingly enough, Abbas's suggestion that Hamas was mimicking Al-Qaeda made no impact at all in Israel, where the issue was put to rest a long time ago.

In late December 2001, Israel's internal security service, Shabak, said it seized a document written by Hamas leaders detained in Israeli prisons. In that document, imprisoned Hamas leaders warned against the spread of Al-Qaeda's ideas in Palestinian circles and especially among Hamas members. Imprisoned Hamas leaders described Al-Qaeda's thinking as "isolationist and destructive." The imprisoned leaders urged their colleagues to do everything possible to stop Al-Qaeda's ideas from gaining ground among Hamas supporters. Later on, preachers at mosques controlled by Hamas started warning the congregation against "admiring" 9/11, reminding worshippers that the Palestinians cannot survive without international support.

Former Shabak chief Ofer Dekel, a man who used to be in charge of security operations against Hamas, is of the same opinion. He told Yediot Aharonot on 16 March 2006 that massive differences existed between Hamas and Al-Qaeda. Hamas believes in a

combination of political work and military pressure and it understands the need for regional alliances and for public support. None of this is true for Al-Qaeda, Dekel remarked.

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