

Backgrounders

Hammas

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Updated: August 1, 2014

Introduction

Hammas is a Palestinian militant movement that also serves as one of the territories' two major political parties. A nationalist-Islamist spinoff of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Hammas was founded in 1987, during the first intifada, and later emerged at the forefront of armed resistance to Israel. The United States and the European Union consider Hammas a terrorist organization. Its rival party, Fatah, which dominates the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), has renounced violence.

The support Hammas garners among Palestinians largely owes to the foil it plays to Fatah, which many see as having grown corrupted by power while delivering little through its peaceful cooperation and negotiation with Israel. Hammas candidates won Palestinian elections in 2006, but their government was dismissed in 2007, resulting in the political bifurcation of the West Bank and Gaza. While Fatah reasserted its authority in the West Bank, Hammas has exercised de facto rule over the Gaza Strip in the years since.

Origins

Hammas, an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya ("Islamic Resistance Movement"), was founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a Palestinian cleric who became an activist in local branches of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) after dedicating his early life to Islamic scholarship in Cairo. Beginning in the late 1960s, Yassin preached and performed charitable work in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, both of which were occupied by Israeli forces following the [1967 Six Day War](#).

Yassin established Hammas as the Brotherhood's local political arm in December 1987, following the outbreak of the first intifada, a Palestinian uprising against Israeli control of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. The following year, Hammas published its [charter](#), calling for the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic society in historic Palestine.

Hammas first employed suicide bombing, a tactic with which it would later become identified, in April 1993, five months before PLO leader Yasir Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords. The historic pact established limited self-government for parts of the West Bank and Gaza under the Palestinian Authority (PA). Hammas condemned the accords, in which the PLO gave Israel its formal recognition.

The United States designated Hammas a [foreign terrorist organization](#) (FTO) in 1997, but the movement nonetheless eclipsed armed factions of the nationalist organization Fatah as the vanguard of violent resistance during the second intifada, in the early 2000s. This uprising, unlike the first, was characterized by suicide bombings rather than civil disobedience, and claimed the lives of [far more](#)

Israeli civilians. In both uprisings, Palestinian fatalities far exceeded Israeli ones.

Leadership

Hamas has a host of leadership bodies that perform various political, military, and social functions. According to the U.S. State Department, general policy is set by an overarching consultative body, often referred to as its politburo, which operates in exile. Local committees manage grassroots issues in Gaza and the West Bank.



Khaled Meshaal has served as political chief since 1996. The former teacher has been based in Doha since Hamas fell out with Meshaal's previous host, Syria, as Palestinian refugees joined predominantly Sunni protestors in calling for reforms beginning in 2011, prompting a violent government backlash, and eventually, civil war. He is Hamas' most frequent interlocutor with the PA and regional governments.

Gaza's de facto prime minister is Ismail Haniyeh, who served as PA prime minister during the brief period between the 2006 legislative elections and his dismissal by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas the following year.

Marwan Issa and Mohammed Deif command Hamas' military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Israeli forces assassinated the militia's founder, Salah Shehadeh, in a 2002 airstrike. Fifteen civilians were killed in the attack, focusing Israeli and international **scrutiny** on such tactics. Yassin, Hamas' founder, was assassinated in 2004.

Salah al-Aroui is believed to direct Hamas' armed activities in the West Bank from overseas.

Funding

As a designated terrorist entity, Hamas is cut off from official assistance that the United States and European Union provide to the PLO in the West Bank. Historically, much of its funding came from Palestinian expatriates and private donors in the Gulf. In addition, some Islamic charities in the West have channeled money to Hamas-backed social service groups, prompting asset freezes by the U.S. Treasury.

Egypt and Israel largely **closed their borders with Gaza** in 2006–2007, restricting the movement of goods and people into and out of the territory. Israel also maintains a maritime blockade. Until recently, a sophisticated network of more than a thousand tunnels circumvented the Egyptian crossing, allowing staples such as food, medicine, and cheap gas for electricity production into the territory, as well as construction materials, cash, and arms. The illicit trade provided some material relief for Gazans, while Hamas levied a tax on the traffic, a major source of its revenue.

Changing regional circumstances have not only isolated Hamas politically but also put severe strains on its coffers. With the ascension of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's military-backed government in 2013–14, Cairo is hostile to Hamas, which it sees as an extension of its chief domestic rival, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian army has shut down most of the tunnels entering into its territory in the course of waging a counterinsurgency campaign on its side of the border, in the **Sinai Peninsula**.

Hamas distanced itself from Iran, its primary benefactor, due to Tehran's support for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his regime's repression of antigovernment activists beginning in 2011. Iran

reportedly cut funding to Hamas in the fallout, and sought to bolster its ties to other resistance groups in the region, such as Islamic Jihad. [Qatar's financial support](#) largely dried up as well, collateral damage of the Gulf country's efforts to mend ties with its neighbors, with whom it had fallen out in part for backing the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The cumulative effect of these financial pressures helped push Hamas toward a reconciliation deal with Fatah in April 2014. Yet despite the deal, the Palestinian Authority [has not provided salaries](#) for the more than [forty thousand Gazan public servants](#) hired by Hamas, which many analysts believe was a contributing factor to the latest outbreak of violence.

As Governing Party

Hamas' primary base of operation is in the Gaza Strip, the coastal enclave of 1.7 million Palestinians, where it has remained the de facto authority since shortly after Israel's unilateral withdrawal in 2005. The following year, Hamas surprised Western observers by winning a majority of seats by a narrow margin and forming a government. It may have earned votes as a protest movement and for the social services it provided, but the win was likely more a rejection of the incumbent Fatah, which was widely perceived as having grown corrupt at the helm of the PLO and delivering little to Palestinians with its program of negotiation.

The outcome was unacceptable to the PLO, which ousted Hamas from power in the West Bank. In Gaza, Hamas routed Fatah's militias in a week of internecine fighting, resulting in a political schism between the two Palestinian territories.

As it took over the remnants of PA institutions in the strip, it established such governmental structures as a judiciary and put in place authoritarian institutions. Hamas restricts the [Gazan media](#), the political opposition, and nongovernmental organizations, leaving few mechanisms of accountability. Meanwhile, most Gazans receive social services from [UN agencies](#) and humanitarian organizations.

"Hamas remains [more hard-line than the public it seeks to lead](#)," says Nathan Brown, a scholar of political Islam. The group suffers from relatively low support among Palestinians, particularly in the West Bank. Palestinian pollsters found in early 2014 that in [hypothetical legislative elections](#) [PDF], Hamas would [fall far short of the majority](#) it won in 2006, including among its Gazan base.

Fatah garners only marginally greater support. Both parties suffer from the [absence of political legitimacy](#), says CFR's Robert Danin. Rather than a common political agenda, they entered into the reconciliation deal to facilitate new Palestinian elections and break the stagnation in Palestinian politics, he says. Palestinians have not voted for a president since 2008, nor a legislature since 2006, and the political bifurcation between the West Bank and Gaza is widely unpopular.

As Armed Resistance

The second intifada ended in early 2005 as Israeli security forces grew more successful at thwarting suicide attacks and moved against militant groups in the West Bank. Though Hamas gave up suicide bombing, it remained committed to armed resistance, and as it entrenched in the Gaza Strip, it took to launching rockets and mortars into Israeli territory. The crude weapons are by nature indiscriminate, but also ineffective; [ten Israeli civilians](#) were killed between January 2009 and May 2014, according to the Israeli rights group B'Tselem.

It has also attempted incursions into Israeli territory, most famously kidnapping Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006. Five years later, Israel released 1,027 Palestinian prisoners to secure Shalit's release.

Yet as Hamas consolidated its authority in Gaza, Israel came to rely on it to contain more radical resistance groups, such as Islamic Jihad. Since Operation Cast Lead, Israel's twenty-two day invasion in the winter of 2008–2009, long periods of détente between Hamas and Israel have been the norm, a state of mutual deterrence the Israeli government has described as "[quiet for quiet](#)."

But that state of deterrence is [a fragile one](#), punctuated by intermittent volleys of rockets fired by Gazan militants into Israel and retaliatory Israeli air strikes to degrade their arsenals, a cycle Israelis have come to know as "[mowing the lawn](#)." Periods of quiet allowed Hamas and other militant groups to expand and modernize their arsenals of rockets.

Egypt brokered a ceasefire that ended a round of fighting in March 2012. Israel effectively delegated to Hamas responsibility for enforcing it by withholding rocket fire and restraining more radical groups in Gaza. In 2013, [sixty-three rockets were launched](#) at Israel from Gaza, compared to 2,327 the year prior, according to the Shin Bet, Israel's security agency.

In the West Bank, meanwhile, Hamas has been driven underground. Its social and military infrastructure has been dismantled, and many of its members arrested by [PA and Israeli security forces](#). Many Palestinians saw Fatah's security cooperation as a cynical maneuver to crush its rivals.

Negotiations between Israel and the PA have generally assumed Hamas would act as a spoiler. Not only would a final-status agreement likely violate its founding principles, but it would also marginalize the movement while vindicating its chief rival, Fatah.

A Way Forward?

The United States and European Union provisionally recognized the Palestinian reconciliation government, which the [U.S. State Department characterized as "technocratic,"](#) and said did "not include ministers affiliated with Hamas." A government including ministers from Hamas would have triggered a foreign aid cut-off, as Hamas has not recognized the three principles insisted on by the Quartet (the United States, EU, UN, and Russia): renunciation of violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of prior international agreements.

Hamas entered into the arrangement politically and economically weak. But in the weeks since, public support for Abbas and the PA has withered due to the [collapse](#) of nine months of intensive negotiations aiming to achieve a final-status agreement—the long-sought two-state solution—and the PA's security cooperation during the events that precipitated the current round of violence.

In June 2014, Netanyahu accused Hamas of kidnapping and murdering [three Israeli teens](#) in the West Bank. Israeli security forces rearrested some of the Palestinian ex-convicts released in the Shalit deal, accusing them of recidivism. Indications that a rogue cell carried out the abductions highlighted that the movement's leadership is [unable to control](#) all those affiliated with it, analysts said.

Israel responded militarily to the volley of rockets from Gaza that followed. Netanyahu has said he seeks to degrade Hamas' military capacities and restore calm, while politicians on his right flank have called for a broader ground operation that might [decisively defeat Hamas](#), but could result in Israel once again occupying Gaza. Meanwhile, negotiations that [would vindicate Abbas' approach](#) over that of Hamas are not in the offing.

The most plausible off-ramp, some analysts say, is a deal in which Hamas would [disarm in exchange for economic relief](#) for Gaza. But Israeli security concerns have been heightened by [revelations](#) of a [tunnel infrastructure](#) under the Gaza-Israel border. Israel, then, is even less likely to permit transfers of the construction materials that are necessary to rebuild Gaza.

It is unclear whether the reconciliation government can survive this round of violence, particularly if Hamas emerges from it politically empowered. If it survives, some argue, elections can **[integrate Gaza into Palestinian politics](#)** and provide the underpinnings of a more robust cease-fire. A terrorist designation precludes the United States and European Union from speaking directly with Hamas, but Washington has turned to Turkey and Qatar as interlocutors.

Additional Resources

The *Economist's* Nicolas Pelham discusses the **[economics of Gaza's illicit tunnel trade](#)** and the emergence of a Hamas-led bureaucracy regulating it.

Isolating Gaza has counterproductively entrenched Hamas, writes CFR's Robert Danin, who **[calls for Gaza's integration](#)** in the Palestinian economy and political institutions to facilitate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

This CFR Crisis Guide provides an in-depth, multimedia look at the history of the **[Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#)**.

The Israeli NGO Gisha **[maps access to the Gaza Strip](#)** [PDF] and documents restrictions on the movement of people and goods enforced by Israel and Egypt.

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