

The “Something worse than Hamas” Myth

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In seeking to dissuade Israel from putting an end to Hamas’s reign of terror in Gaza, the head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, warned on July 26, 2014 that: “If Hamas were destroyed and gone, we would probably end up with something much worse.”

Referring to the radical Salafist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which last month declared that it had reestablished the caliphate in territories it controls in Iraq, Flynn predicted “something like ISIS” would fill the power vacuum created in the event of Hamas’s downfall.

Worse than Hamas? Really? While Salafi jihadists like ISIS, and militant offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, like Hamas, differ on questions such as the speed and methods by which Islamic law (*sharia*) should be imposed on Muslims, there is little daylight between them about the treatment of Jews. In their eyes all are deserving of death and must, as a matter of religious commandment, be annihilated.

For example, Article 7 of the Hamas Covenant (published in 1988 and available in full English translation here: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp) states that Hamas “aspires to the realisation of Allah's promise”, namely: “The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.” If anything, the simple difference is that ISIS are equal opportunity murderers – targeting Christians, Jews, Shi’ites, and any Sunni who does not buy into their particular vision of Islamic utopia – whereas Hamas and its sister organization, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), are singularly obsessed with killing Jews.

Hamas has also proven itself to be as implacable as the most radical Salafist armed groups operating in Syria and Iraq, and far more capable than they are at mobilizing for war. After taking control of the Gaza Strip through a violent coup in 2007, Hamas became responsible for governing 1.8 million Palestinians. Yet power and the daily duties of government have not moderated Hamas, as many had hoped.

On the contrary, in less than six years Hamas has led three major rounds of violence against Israel, demonstrating beyond reasonable doubt that it cannot be trusted to exercise responsible sovereignty. Between each such rounds of high intensity conflict it has engaged in almost daily firing of mortar and missiles from within the Palestinian civilian population and United Nations facilities in Gaza, onto

Israel's civilian population – hiding behind Palestinian schools and hospitals, to deliberately target Israeli schools and hospitals.

Inside Gaza too, Hamas essentially governs to kill. Every state-like asset seized by Hamas has since been applied to the cause of jihad. Every kindergarten, school, university, and summer camp has been turned into a hub of hatred and radicalization of future generations. The more we learn about Hamas's vast subterranean construction project, the more it seems that every truckload of Israeli-supplied steel and cement has gone to build missiles, rocket launchers, underground bunkers, and terror-tunnels. Every dollar, euro, Iranian or Qatari riyal received in international development aid seems to have been ploughed into creating mechanisms of terror, not improving the lives of Palestinians. Indeed, according to Hamas's own officials, at least 160 Palestinian children have been killed while digging "terror tunnels" into Israel. Groups like ISIS have demonstrated nothing like these mobilization capabilities, and it would take them decades of uninterrupted activity to attain them.

Hamas and PIJ are far more dangerous than any of the alternative governors that could realistically emerge in post-Hamas Gaza, in that they have, for over two decades now, been systematically armed, trained, and funded by Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and most recently Qatar. Even if these or other sponsors were to overcome their aversion for aiding and abetting ISIS-like jihadists, it would again take a highly disciplined organization many years of undisturbed activity to attain a fraction of Hamas's current know-how and capabilities.

Moreover, it is precisely under the conditions of poverty, violence, radicalization, and forced Islamization implemented by Hamas and PIJ in Gaza that even more radical Salafist jihadist organizations have taken root and flourished. Leaving Hamas and PIJ in control of Gaza, therefore, is the surer recipe for the steady growth of ISIS-like groups in Gaza and Sinai. In contrast, where the Palestinian Authority (PA) governs in the West Bank, there is no significant Salafist jihadist influence.

Those, like Flynn, who seek to preserve Hamas's rule in Gaza under the false guise that it is somehow the lesser-of-evils, understate Hamas's perniciousness and effectively condemn millions of Israelis and Palestinians to a future of perpetual conflict and misery.

There are other, better political scenarios for a post-Hamas Gaza. Gaza is not Somalia, at least not yet! Between the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Israel there are strong local alternative governance providers who can set Gaza on a far healthier political and economic trajectory. And of course the United States, European Union, and even the Egyptian and Saudi-led Arab League can support the locals with financial aid, capacity-building, security and diplomatic support.

Those who truly want to see a secure, stable, and hopeful Gaza must be prepared to remove Hamas and PIJ from power and be ready to implement a robust post-conflict reconstruction plan. It can be done. The Gaza Strip is a tiny piece of land populated by less than two million people. As a reconstruction challenge it is similar in scope to Kosovo, not Afghanistan or Iraq.

Israelis, Egyptians, Saudis, and moderate Palestinians are united as never before in their desire to see Gaza freed from Hamas's rule. It is high time the leaders of the free world stand with them.

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