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Backgrounder

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Hamas

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What is Hamas?

Hamas is the largest and most influential Palestinian militant movement. In January 2006, the group won the Palestinian Authority's (PA) general legislative elections, defeating Fatah, the party of the PA's president, Mahmoud Abbas, and setting the stage for a power struggle. Since attaining power, Hamas has continued its refusal to recognize the state of Israel, leading to crippling economic sanctions. Hamas maintained a cease-fire brokered in March 2005 until June 9, 2006, when it ended the truce after reports that errant Israeli shell killed several civilians on a Gaza beach. The Israeli Defense Forces later denied responsibility for the deaths. Historically, Hamas has sponsored an extensive social service network. More notoriously, the group has also operated a terrorist wing carrying out suicide bombings and attacks using mortars and short-range rockets. The group has launched attacks both in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and inside the pre-1967 boundaries of Israel. In Arabic, the word "hamas" means zeal. But it's also an Arabic acronym for "Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya," or Islamic Resistance Movement.

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What are Hamas's origins?

Hamas grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious and political organization founded in Egypt with branches throughout the Arab world. Beginning in the late 1960s, Hamas's founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, preached and did charitable work in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, both of which were occupied by Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War. In 1973, Yassin established al-Mujamma' al-Islami (the Islamic Center) to coordinate the Muslim Brotherhood's political activities in Gaza. Yassin founded Hamas as the Muslim Brotherhood's local political arm in December 1987, following the eruption of the first intifada, a Palestinian uprising against Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas published its official charter in 1988. The first Hamas suicide bombing took place in April 1993. Five months later, Yasir Arafat, the then-leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Yitzhak Rabin, then-prime minister of Israel, sealed the Oslo accords—an Israeli-Palestinian peace pact that eventually unraveled. Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli right-wing fanatic in November 1995. Arafat died in November 2004.

Who are Hamas's leaders?

Since its victory in the Palestinian legislative elections, Hamas has failed to unify around a coherent program, leading to partisan tensions within the Palestinian Authority that verge on civil war. Ismail Haniyeh, the Palestinian prime minister and senior Hamas figure in Gaza, has appeared at odds with Khaled Meshal, Hamas's overall leader who lives in Syria in exile. A [Backgrounder](#) profiles these and other Hamas leaders.

Where does Hamas operate?

Historically, Hamas has operated as an opposition group in Gaza, the West Bank, and inside Israel. Most of the population of Gaza and the West Bank is officially ruled by the PA government, so Hamas' new role as the legislature's controlling party has forced the group to reconsider the function and scope of its operations. For instance, since their party took power, Hamas leaders have embarked on several diplomatic visits throughout the region. Early on, some observers hoped that political legitimacy—and the accountability that comes with it—could force Hamas away from using violence to achieve its goals. But to date, the group has shown little interest in stopping the kidnappings and rocket fire that continue to draw Israel's ire. Meanwhile, Hamas shares responsibility with Fatah for much of the bloody infighting between the rival parties in Gaza.

What does Hamas believe and what are its goals?

Hamas combines Palestinian nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism. Its founding charter commits the group to the destruction of Israel, the replacement of the PA with an Islamist state on the West Bank and Gaza, and to raising "the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine." Its leaders have called suicide attacks the "F-16" of the Palestinian people. Hamas believes "peace talks will do no good," Rantisi said in April 2004. "We do not believe we can live with the enemy."

Is Hamas only a terrorist group?

No. In addition to its military wing, the so-called Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade, Hamas devotes much of its estimated \$70-million annual budget to an extensive social services network. It funds schools, orphanages, mosques, healthcare clinics, soup kitchens, and sports leagues. "Approximately 90 percent of its work is in social, welfare, cultural, and educational activities," writes the Israeli scholar Reuven Paz. The Palestinian Authority often fails to provide such services; Hamas's efforts in this area—as well as a reputation for honesty, in contrast to the many Fatah officials accused of corruption—help to explain the broad popularity it summoned to defeat Fatah in the PA's recent elections.

How big is Hamas?

Hamas's military wing is believed to have more than one thousand active members and thousands of supporters and sympathizers. On March 22, 2004, more than two hundred thousand Palestinians are

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estimated to have marched in Yassin's funeral. On April 18, 2004, a similar number publicly mourned the death of Rantisi.

Where does Hamas's money come from?

Since its electoral victory to lead the PA, Hamas has had public funds at its disposal, though it does not have access to the foreign-aid dollars traditionally provided by the United States and European Union to the PA. Historically, much of Hamas's funding came from Palestinian expatriates and private donors in Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Persian Gulf states. Iran also provides significant support, which some diplomats say could amount to \$20 million to \$30 million per year. In addition, some Muslim charities in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe funnel money into Hamas-backed social service groups. In December 2001, the Bush administration seized the assets of the Holy Land Foundation, the largest Muslim charity in the United States, on suspicions it was funding Hamas.

What attacks is Hamas responsible for?

Hamas is believed to have killed more than five hundred people in more than 350 separate terrorist attacks since 1993. Not all Hamas's attacks have been carried out by suicide bombers. The group has also accepted responsibility for assaults using mortars, short-range rockets, and small arms fire.

How does Hamas recruit suicide bombers?

The organization generally targets deeply religious young men—although some bombers have been older. The recruits do not fit the usual psychological profile of suicidal people, who are often desperate or clinically depressed. Hamas bombers often hold paying jobs, even in poverty-stricken Gaza. What they have in common, studies say, is an intense hatred of Israel. After a bombing, Hamas gives the family of the suicide bomber between three thousand dollars and five thousand dollars and assures them their son died a martyr in holy jihad.

How does Hamas train the bombers?

The recruits undergo intense religious indoctrination, attend lectures, and undertake long fasts. The week before the bombing, the volunteers are watched closely by two Hamas activists for any signs of wavering, according to Nasra Hassan, writing in *the New Yorker*. Shortly before the "sacred explosion," as Hamas calls it, the bomber records a video testament. To draw inspiration, he repeatedly watches his video and those made by his predecessors and then sets off for his would-be martyrdom after performing a ritual ablution and donning clean clothes. Hamas clerics assure the bombers their deaths will be painless and that dozens of virgins await them in paradise. The average bombing costs about \$150.

Is Hamas popular among Palestinians?

According to Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, in late 2006 Hamas still enjoyed public backing, though most Palestinians also wanted to see a negotiated settlement with Israel. According to Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, the U.S. security coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Territories, brutal internal clashes in Gaza have caused Hamas to lose some of the goodwill of the Palestinians. In fact, the group has a history of fluctuating approval: Following the collapse of the peace process in the late 1990s, Hamas' popularity rose as Arafat's fell. In the spring of 2002, during a period of intensified armed conflict between Israeli security forces and Hamas militants, polls showed that Arafat's Fatah faction of the PLO and the Islamists each commanded support from roughly 30 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (the remaining Palestinians were either independent, undecided, or supported other factions). But trust in Hamas dropped in 2004. In a poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center after Arafat's death, 18.6 percent of Palestinians named Hamas as the Palestinian faction they most trusted, down from 23 percent a year earlier. Hamas experienced a short-lived spike in popularity after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005; after a rocket explosion at a Hamas rally September 23, 2005, killed fifteen people, Hamas blamed Israel and launched rocket attacks against it. Israel retaliated with punitive air strikes, which Palestinians blamed Hamas for provoking. The explosion was revealed to be an

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accident.

Has Hamas always participated in the Palestinian electoral process?

No. Hamas boycotted the January 2005 PA presidential elections. But even prior to its 2006 victory in the PA's legislative elections, the group had made strong showings in municipal elections, especially in Gaza. In December 2004 West Bank local elections, Fatah won 135 seats and Hamas won seventy-five. In Gaza, where Hamas is based, it won seventy-seven out of 118 seats in ten council elections held in January 2005. Hamas appeared to have lost its political momentum in a September 2005 round of local elections in the West Bank: Fatah, benefiting from the Israeli withdrawal, took 54 percent of the vote over Hamas' 26 percent.

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