HAMAS - THE ISLAMIC RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

ORIGINS - TERROR - GAZA - MARCH OF RETURN
Who is Hamas

Hamas is an Arabic word that translates to courage or zeal and is the acronym of al-Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya—the name of the Islamic Resistance Movement, which is a Palestinian Sunni-Islamist terror organization. Its aims are outlined in its 1988 covenant.

Hamas’s primary objective is the destruction of Israel, which it considers a foreign occupier on sacred Muslim land. The organization has utilized suicide bombings to deadly effect against Israeli civilians particularly during the Second Intifada. Since 2007 it has been the de-facto ruler of the Gaza Strip, using the territory to launch thousands of rockets at Israel.

Hamas is designated a terrorist organization by the United States, Israel, United Kingdom, European Union and Canada. In 2014, Forbes named Hamas the second wealthiest terror group with a turnover of a billion dollars.
Background

Hamas was founded by Palestinian cleric Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who was confined to a wheelchair due to being a quadriplegic since the age of 12 after sustaining an injury while wrestling with a friend. He dedicated his early life to Islamic scholarship, eventually gaining admission to and attending the prestigious Al Azhar University in Egypt. Ultimately Yassin found the rigors of his studies there unsustainable due to his deteriorating health. This resulted in him being educated at home where he read widely, particularly on religion, politics, sociology, and economics.

Yassin became an activist in local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood and by the late 1960’s had begun preaching sermons after Friday prayers that attracted large numbers. He gained acclaim for performing charitable work in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which had come under Israeli control after the war of 1967.

In 1987 a traffic accident involving an Israeli driver killed a number of Palestinians, and this led to a major escalation of violence against Israel that became known as the First Intifada. It was against this backdrop that Yassin and six other Palestinians founded Hamas as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas was supported by international Muslim Brotherhood affiliated charities and social institutions that had gained a significant foothold in the West Bank and Gaza.
In 1988 Hamas would publish its infamous charter, which called for the destruction of Israel, the murder of Jews worldwide, and the establishment of an Islamic state in the Holy Land. In 1989 Hamas carried out their first terror attack against an Israeli target when two soldiers were abducted and murdered. In response to the attack, Yassin was arrested. An Israeli court convicted him of ordering Hamas members to kidnap and kill the two Israeli soldiers, and sentenced him to life in prison.

In 1991 Hamas established its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade. It was named after Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a Syrian born Muslim preacher who was active in Mandatory Palestine. He organized the Black Hand terror organization in the 1930’s to oppose both British rule and Zionism.

The identities and rank within the organization of fighters in the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade are a closely guarded secret, thus allowing them to blend in to civilian populations when engaging Israeli forces, with their identities only being revealed upon their death and used mainly for propaganda purposes.
The Brigades are an integral part of the Hamas organization and remain subordinate to the goals and ideological positions of Hamas, yet they do retain a significant level of decision-making independence.

Some prominent political scientists suggest that the separation of the political and military wings shield Hamas's political leaders from responsibility for terrorism while the plausible deniability this provides makes Hamas an eligible representative for prospective peace negotiations. Also, as Hamas runs extensive social welfare programs, its leaders hope to insulate these from being targeted.

On April 6 1994, Hamas introduced a new tool in to their war against Israel: suicide bombing.

Save the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (known commonly as the Tamil Tigers) terrorist group, suicide bombing campaigns were relatively unheard of when Hamas began employing them against Israeli targets in an effort to derail the peace process that was taking place between the Israeli government and Yasser Arafat. According to available data, 742 civilians were killed and 4,899 were injured by suicide bombings in Israel and the Disputed Territories between 1993 and 2015.

Hamas have employed suicide bombings, car bombings, vehicular assaults, stabbings and rocket attacks in their attacks on Israel. It has been reported that the Brigades consist of 25,000 full time fighters and a further 20,000 fighters in reserve.
Adherents to the Sunni branch of Islam, Hamas follows the theology of the majority of Muslims worldwide: around 85% of the Muslim world is Sunni as opposed to the Shia form of Islam which makes up around 15%. This split between the two streams of Islamic theology goes back to the 7th century, and originated in an argument over Mohammed’s legitimate line of succession after his death.

As an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, much of Hamas’ ideology is derived from that source. But in 1988, when Hamas published its official charter, it deviated from the Muslim Brotherhood’s stated – though not strictly followed - position of non-violence.

Article one of Hamas' charter states that the group derives its "ideas, ways of thinking and understanding of the universe, life and man" from Islam. On the subject of jihad, the charter states that it becomes a duty for every Muslim to take part in it when "enemies" seize Muslim territory. Article eight states that "the Quran is its constitution: Jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes." The ideology of the group is further highlighted in article 13, labeling peaceful solutions as contradictory to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement.

The group's charter will not allow anything more than a temporary truce with Israel, although it makes extensive use of truces when such is in its interests.

The short-term goal of Hamas is to “liberate” Palestine, including modern-day Israel, from what they view as Israeli occupation. The long-term aim seeks to establish an Islamic state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.
Gaza Takeover

After the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Palestinian legislative elections were held in January of 2006. In a surprise to many, Hamas won a majority of seats, allowing it to form a government in an election that was expected to keep Fatah and Mahamud Abbas in power. It seems very likely that Hamas may have secured votes as a result of the social services it provided, and many observers believe the Hamas victory was more about the rejection of Fatah, which was perceived as corrupt and delivering little to ordinary Palestinians with its programs.

After months of tension with its rival Fatah, with sporadic factional clashes and a short-lived unity government, fierce clashes broke out in the Gaza Strip in June of 2007.

On June 10, 2007 the Fatah–Hamas conflict culminated in clashes between the Fatah-allied forces and Hamas-allied forces. Hamas militants seized several Fatah members and threw one of them, Mohammed Sweirki, an officer in the elite Palestinian Presidential Guard, off the top of the tallest building in Gaza.

As the fighting concluded with a decisive Hamas victory, the terror group killed, tortured and imprisoned rivals from Fatah. Hamas was, and to this day remains, the de-facto ruler of the Gaza Strip.
As it took over the remnants of PA institutions in the Strip, Hamas established such governmental structures as a judiciary and put in place authoritarian institutions. Hamas, in keeping with their tyrannical policies, restricts basic freedoms in the territory.

Political oppositions, NGO’s and media are all strictly controlled. As a Human Rights Watch report from October 2018 stated, “Hamas in Gaza have in recent years carried out scores of arbitrary arrests for peaceful criticism of the authorities, particularly on social media, among independent journalists, on university campuses, and at demonstrations.”
Funding

In 2014 it was reported that Hamas’s annual budget was just under 900 million dollars. There are credible reports that international funds flowing in to Gaza intended for aid and infrastructure are being subverted by Hamas to bankroll its own terror operations rather providing relief to the civilian population. Indeed, reports have surfaced of local administrators for charities World Vision and Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency funnelling funds earmarked for relief operations in Gaza to Hamas for terror purposes.

Much of the direct financial support from Hamas comes from private overseas donors from oil rich Gulf States sympathetic to the Hamas cause and ideology, with funds being funneled via numerous charities. Qatar, where Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal currently resides, and the United Arab Emirates also continue to provide significant funding for the group. In recent years, Turkey under its strongman President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also begun contributing to the Hamas budget.
Hamas also ran a network of smuggling tunnels underneath the Gaza-Egypt border that generated millions of dollars of revenue for the organization until Egypt took action by flooding the tunnels with sewage on numerous occasions. Eventually in October 2014, days after an attack in which 33 Egyptian soldiers were killed; Egypt announced it would create a buffer zone between Palestinian Rafah and Egyptian Rafah, where most tunnels are believed to be. The 5km buffer zone has all but put an end the smuggling tunnels on its border.

One of Hamas’ largest sponsors is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has provided the group with both financial and military aid for many years via Syria and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. Iran, while a Shia Muslim nation, is arming a Sunni Muslim terror organization because the goal of destroying Israel is seen as greater then sectarian differences.

Relations with Iran became strained in the course of the Syrian civil war because Hamas, along with the broader Muslim Brotherhood, supported the uprising against Bashar al-Assad. Hamas’s leader in Syria left for Qatar.
Meanwhile, Iran and its powerful proxy Hezbollah supported Assad both militarily and financially. Relations with Hamas became increasingly strained as its leaders refused to support the Iranian-backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It has also started to establish more cordial relations with two of Iran's biggest regional foes, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

But by March of 2018, as the Syrian civil war wound down, there had been serious rapprochement between the two. Some suggest that Hamas’s lack of funds and its regional ambitions, primarily that of having a presence on Israel’s borders similar to what it now has in Syria, were among the reasons. In 2018 there have been numerous visits by Hamas leaders to Tehran, with both sides expressing strong support for one another once again.
Hamas continues to maintain that “all types of legitimate resistance are practiced to end the oppressions and injustices imposed by Israel” and that it is their right to “resist with all means, including armed resistance, guaranteed by divine and international laws.”

In May 2017, a new political platform was published by the organization, presenting a softer tone on certain issues. Many saw this as a PR stunt. Yet the platform continued to call for “armed resistance” as Hamas’s primary strategy to liberate all of Palestine from the river to the sea.

On April 6th 1994, a Hamas operative drove alongside a bus carrying Israeli students in Afula, and blew up his car and himself killing 8 people. Thus began Hamas’ campaign of suicide bombings, which would wreak havoc and kill hundreds in the years to come.

Through much of the 1990’s and early 2000’s, the use of suicide bombers became the tactic of choice by Hamas, dispatching bombers to target Israeli civilians and military targets. This resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians, with busses being a frequent target of the terror group.
During the Second Intifada, that would run from 2000 to 2005, the level of violence against Israel increased and Hamas was at the forefront of this. Hamas and the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades carried out numerous attacks on Israeli civilian targets during the Intifada, including an attack on a Passover Seder in 2002 in Netanya, which killed 28 people. Overall, Hamas would carry out over 400 attacks in Israel, the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Their attacks comprised of shootings, stabbings, firing mortars and bombings. Hamas carried out 52 suicide bombings, which murdered 377 people and wounded over 2000.

As Israeli forces developed strategies for thwarting suicide attacks and moved against terror infrastructure in the West Bank, the violence began to subside and the Intifada came to an end. With improvements in Israeli intelligence and security procedures, suicide attacks became more difficult for Hamas. As a result the terrorist group embraced new tactics for murder as it became firmly entrenched in the Gaza Strip and began launching rockets and mortars at Israeli territory.
Though some of the early incarnations of these rockets were crude devices, they caused major disruption to the lives of communities in the South of Israel, particularly the town of Sderot, and led to a generation of children suffering from PTSD. But in recent years, the sophistication and range of rockets has increased exponentially. By 2006, Israel’s larger costal city of Ashkelon was in range, and in 2009 Russian-made Katyush rockets hit the large cities of Ashdod and Beersheba. In 2012, for the first time, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv came under attack from Iranian-made Fajr 5 missiles fired from Gaza. In a major escalation of violence by Hamas, in November 2018 Hamas fired over 400 rockets at Israeli territory in the space of 25 hours – the largest and densest barrage of rocket fire Israel has experienced from Hamas to-date.

In response to the daily threat posed by Hamas rockets, Israeli technology such as the Iron Dome missile defense system has been key in keeping the number of civilian casualties to a minimum.
Hamas has also attempted incursions into Israeli territory, most infamously kidnapping Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006. Five years later, he was released in exchange for over 1000 Palestinian prisoners from Israel prisons, many of whom were convicted terrorists.

In June 2014, three Israeli teens who were hitchhiking to their homes in Gush Etzion were kidnapped and murdered. After initially denying being part of the kidnap and murder in August, Hamas admitted responsibility by stating it was an operation of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

In response to the callous murder of innocent teens, Israeli forces launched a ground incursion into Gaza, and it was through these incursions the extent of a relatively new threat was discovered: terror tunnels.

Hamas had been building a network of tunnels beneath the Gaza – Israel border to enable terror attacks in Israeli territory. Israel went to great lengths to destroy many of these during the 2014 conflict, with building costs of the tunnels estimated to be around $100 million. Hamas had reportedly used young children to work in dark inhumane conditions to dig the tunnels into Israel. Hamas continues to build sophisticated tunnels in an attempt to circumvent the Israeli security apparatus and infiltrate Israeli territory in order to murder Israeli civilians. In early April 2016, Israel blocked private cement transfers to Gaza after claiming that Hamas had been diverting shipments for its own use, likely the reconstruction of its underground tunnel network.
March of Return

At the end of March 2018, Hamas launched what it called its “March of Return” campaign, which called on Gazans to march on and destroy the border with Israel. Organizers claimed the marches were non violent and were intended to highlight the situation in Gaza and the so-called right of return for Palestinian refugees. The reality, however, is that these were violent riots with the goals of breaching the border and infiltrating Israeli territory, all with the aim of killing Israelis.

The largest and deadliest confrontation took place on May 14, the day of the US Embassy dedication in Jerusalem. An estimated 50,000 Palestinians protested on the Gaza border, and by the end of the day at least 60 Gazans were dead and thousands wounded. Some rioters engaged in violent activities, including attempted infiltrations into Israel and the use of various weapons against IDF soldiers and outposts. IDF soldiers responded with riot dispersing methods, and, when necessary, live fire.
Activist Ahmad Abu Ratima, one of the organizers and spokesman of the Return March campaign, explicitly wrote on his Facebook page about the plan for a mass infiltration, first of the Israeli communities outside the Gaza border and then into the depth of Israel, even at the cost of Palestinian lives: "If the Gazan Palestinians manage to recruit 100,000 non-violent protesters, and the other areas manage to recruit tens of thousands, the occupation will be hard put to deal with these mass marches. Even if some people are killed during the actual breaching [of the border]... but thanks to [their sacrifice] the Palestinians manage to cross the separation fence and reach their land that was occupied in 1948, it will be a reasonable price to pay. Thousands of victims have fallen in the wars without [achieving] any political results... This time, deaths will be justified and will be for the sake of making a significant national achievement.” Abu Ratima also posted in a private WhatsApp group for the march, "Within ten minutes, all the returning [marchers] will be in the very heart of the settlement of Sderot, and then the weapons of the occupation will be completely useless.”
Hamas also admitted that many of those killed for either attempting to breach the border or for planting explosives were indeed Hamas operatives in civilian clothing. So while international media outlets published stories reporting civilian casualties, Hamas themselves admitted most of the casualties were their fighters intermingled with protesters. As the riots progressed, more reports emerged from Gaza of Hamas forcing civilians to go to the border and threatening bus companies who refused to divert resources to transport civilians to the border.

These tactics are indicative of Hamas’ blatant disregard for human life, and demonstrates their established pattern of using Gazans as human shields so they can mingle among them to avoid repercussions from Israeli security forces while they attempt to commit acts of terror.

As the “March of Return” has evolved into regular border riots, Hamas has now taken to launching incendiary devices into Israel from over the border. Images of incendiary devices attached to balloons landing in Israeli kindergartens, bearing images of cartoon characters to make them appealing to children, are particularly chilling. Hamas seeks to murder Israelis regardless of their age.