



**The Meir Amit Intelligence
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Center**

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This year's summer camps in the Gaza Strip were once again used by Hamas and its military wing to combine social activity with Islamic and political indoctrination and paramilitary training. UNRWA summer camps, which offer activities of a different nature, were again criticized by Hamas and some of them were harassed.



Graduation ceremony at an Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades summer camp for children aged 13 to 18. The children and adolescents wear shirts with the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades logo (PALDF forum, July 29, 2011).

Overview

1. In June-August 2011, as they do every year, **the Hamas administration and military wing** ran summer camps in the Gaza Strip. Registration for the summer camps was held **mostly in mosques**. The slogans for the Hamas summer camps this time were **“Victory through youth” and “Camps of return”** (Felesteen al-Yoom, June 12, 2011; Chinese News Agency, June 19, 2011). **Tens of thousands of children and adolescents from elementary school age to high school age took part in the summer activities**. As in previous years, in addition to social activities **the camps also offered Quran lessons, indoctrination with Hamas’ political ideology, and paramilitary training.**¹

2. Hamas and other terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip **regard the summer camps as a means for inculcating their ideological values and nurturing the next generation of operatives and supporters**. The core values are **radical Islam, “the liberation of Palestine”, jihad and death for the sake of Allah, and other messages drawn from Hamas’ ideology and strategy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict** (e.g., support for the “right of return”, demand to free all Palestinian (terrorist) prisoners, the “liberation” of Palestine from Israel, and indoctrination of hatred against Israel and the Jewish people). The summer camps are often visited by top Hamas officials who help spread the political messages among the youngsters.

3. This year as well **UNRWA operated an alternative summer camp system that hosted 250,000 Gaza Strip children** (far more than the Hamas summer camps). Hamas claimed that The UNRWA summer camps emphasized social activity and promotion of such universal values as peace and coexistence, without the political-religious indoctrination and paramilitary training prevalent in Hamas’ camps. Consequently, **these summer camps were once again harassed by radical Islamic elements** that consider them **competitors for the hearts and minds of the younger generation**; also, UNRWA’s summer camps are accused of “corrupting” Palestinian children and adolescents.

¹ For information on summer camps in 2010 see our September 14, 2010 Information Bulletin: [“This year Hamas’ summer camps in the Gaza Strip again combined political Islamic indoctrination and paramilitary training with social activities. Conspicuous were manifestations of solidarity with Turkey over the Mavi Marmara. UNRWA summer camps, considered competition by Hamas, were again attacked by Islamist extremists.”](#)



Gaza Strip signboard with the slogan of the summer camps: “Victory through youth” (<http://gazacamps.ps>)

The Hamas summer camps—overview

4. Estimates suggest that **nearly 50,000 youngsters took part in Hamas’ summer activities this year** (far more than last year, but less than the number of participants in the summer activities organized by UNRWA). The slogan of the summer camps was “**Victory through youth**” (Felesteen al-Yoom, June 12, 2011). Another slogan was “**Camps of return**” (referring to the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, a recurring theme summer camp participants are indoctrinated with). Mussa al-Samak, senior Hamas official and member of the Central Committee for Summer Camps in the Gaza Strip, called on parents to send their children to the summer camps to spend their school holiday there and **absorb “Islamic and national” values.**



Senior Hamas official Mussa al-Samak announces the opening of the summer camps (<http://gazacamps.ps>)

5. In public statements about the goals of their summer activities, Hamas spokesmen stressed that the purpose of the camps was to **educate the younger generation to religion, morals, and culture.** Speaking at the opening ceremony of the summer camps, senior Hamas official **Isma’il Radwan** said that their purpose was to bring up a generation of children who would act “in the interests of their homeland”, **and give them education emphasizing the Islamic culture and its values.** “If the enemy wants to bet on the slogan ‘the adults will die and the children will forget’, we will tell him that **we shall gain liberty and victory, Allah willing**” (Hamas summer camps website, June 15, 2011).

6. In practice, however, as in previous years, in addition to the diverse social activities (soccer, swimming, entertainment), the summer camps also included **three major themes reflecting Hamas' agenda: paramilitary training, dissemination of Hamas' political messages, and religious indoctrination in the spirit of radical Islam.**

Paramilitary training

7. Every year the children and adolescents taking part in the summer camps undergo **paramilitary training**. In some cases they carry wooden rifles, but some of the older children also use real rifles. The training includes various exercises, hand-to-hand combat, rope climbing, jumping, and crawling, as well as practice in the use of weapons (mostly small arms). Photographs from the summer camps show that such activities were held once again this year.

Paramilitary training and displays



Children wearing green Hamas caps drilling with guns (<http://paltimes.net>, June 26, 2011)



Jumping through flaming hoops and rope climbing (<http://www.paldf.net>, July 10, 2011)



Karate and self defense classes (<http://www.paldf.net>, July 10, 2011)



Hand-to-hand combat training (<http://www.paldf.net>, July 16, 2011)



Crawling practice (<http://www.paldf.net>, July 10, 2011)

Military training for adolescents at summer camps organized by the Hamas military wing; military training in Rafah

8. This year the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the Hamas military wing, organized a week-long summer camp for about one hundred teenagers aged 13 to 18, called "Flag Camp 2". The campers—new activists of the organization—underwent paramilitary training.

9. **The graduation ceremony of the summer camp was held in Al-Zeitoun neighborhood on July 29, 2011.** At the ceremony the teenagers wore military uniform and demonstrated military and physical exercises, such as sliding down ropes from buildings and disassembling and reassembling automatic weapons. **They also reenacted the abduction of Gilad Shalit and blew up a cardboard model of an Israeli tank.** In a speech given at the ceremony, senior Hamas official Mushir al-Masri said that the camp was important for young people **“from the next generation of victory, the generation of the liberation of Palestine”** (AFP, July 30, 2011).

10. In July a summer camp **where adolescents underwent military training** was held in Rafah. At the graduation ceremony the campers demonstrated military exercises using wooden weapons (Hamas forum, Safa, July 20, 2011).

Summer camp graduation ceremony in Rafah (Hamas forum, Safa, July 20, 2011)



Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades summer camp graduation ceremony (PALDF forum, July 29, 2011)



Graduation ceremony of the “Return” summer camp run by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in eastern Gaza (July 15, 2011, PALDF forum)



Graduation ceremony of the "Return" summer camp run by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in eastern Gaza (July 15, 2011, PALDF forum)





Inculcation of Hamas' political messages

11. As part of the political education in the summer camps, the campers often took part in demonstrations and events for the purpose of advancing Hamas' political and propaganda objectives. Such events included:

a. **A demonstration in front of the Red Cross office in Gaza City** where protesters demanded to improve the detainment conditions of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails (Al-Quds, July 4, 2011).

b. **A procession showing support for the flotilla** (Freedom Fleet 2) that was supposed to arrive in the Gaza Strip. During the demonstrations children carried posters with propaganda slogans saying "Stop the siege" and "Save us" (summer camps' Facebook page, July 11, 2011).



Hamas' summer campers at a support rally for Freedom Fleet 2 (<http://www.facebook.com>)

c. **A demonstration for the Al-Aqsa mosque**, at which children carried a poster saying "O, children, the truth is calling you, and a flame is in my heart. My nation is

suffering and the Al-Aqsa mosque has been taken away” (<http://vb.qaweim.com>, July 3, 2011).



Hamas campers’ demonstration for the Al-Aqsa mosque (<http://vb.qaweim.com>, July 3, 2011)

d.A demonstration for the release of Ra’ed Salah, the head of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, detained in London. Many pictures of Ra’ed Salah were carried by the demonstrators, as well as photographs of Hamas “shaheeds” (upper right) with captions that read **“Death for Allah is our highest aspiration”** (<http://vb.qaweim.com>, July 2, 2011).



Children wearing green Hamas caps demonstrate for the release of Ra’ed Salah; the Hamas logo can be seen on the right side of the poster.

Religious Islamic indoctrination

12.Quran studies are an important theme in the summer camp activities. For example, in addition to Hamas’ summer camps, a society called Dar al-Quran al-Kareem & al-Sunnah al-Nabawiya, headed by Hamas activist Abd al-Rahman al-Jamal, opened **its own summer camps at Gaza Strip mosques. The summer camps focused on Quran memorization and hosted about 20 thousand students** (<http://www.swissinfo.ch>).



Left: Quran studies for girls (<http://www.aljura.com>, June 22, 2011); right: Quran studies at a summer camp for boys (<http://www.wosta.ps>, June 12, 2011).

Harassment of UNRWA summer camps continues

13. In addition to Hamas' summer camps, there is also an **extensive alternative system of summer camps operated by UNRWA** for the past several years. This year the six-week summer camps hosted about 250,000 children and adolescents, far more than those attending Hamas' summer camps. Hamas claims that summer camps include sports and leisure activities and emphasize such universal messages as peace and coexistence, [without the political-religious indoctrination and paramilitary training prevalent in Hamas' camps].

14. **Hamas and UNRWA intensely compete for summer campers**, a competition that once again ended with a "victory" for UNRWA. Hamas, which makes efforts to exercise greater control over the Palestinian public, considers UNRWA a competitor that has direct interaction with the Palestinian society and the ability to influence Gazans socially, culturally, and educationally. Hamas and other radical Islamic elements say that UNRWA **oversteps UN mandate** by operating summer camps, since it has turned them into a **hub of political rather than social activity**.

15. In addition, according to Hamas and radical Islamic elements, the summer camps "corrupt" the morals of Palestinian youth (in previous years UNRWA was accused of conducting coeducational activities, distributing drugs, and promoting reconciliation between the Palestinians and the Israelis). **UNRWA** rejects these claims. Gaza Strip human rights activist **Mustafa Ibrahim** noted that, **in Hamas' view, UNRWA "hijacked" almost an entire generation (of Palestinian youth) and beat Hamas on the summer camp front** (Aljazeera Net, July 26, 2011).²

² The fight for the summer camps is **part of a greater battle for the character of education in the Gaza Strip**. See our March 14, 2011 Information Bulletin: ["The battle for the character of education in the Gaza Strip: Hamas and the PIJ repeatedly demand that UNRWA not teach about the Holocaust in its schools, claiming that it is a fabricated, twisted history" that "poisons" the minds of young Palestinians and thus serves Israel's interests"](#).

16. With that in mind, this year saw an even more intense **media battle between Hamas and UNRWA, with each side trying to persuade parents to send their children to its summer camps**. Hamas mobilized the websites, local radio stations, and TV channels it controls for the campaign. Hamas' key message was that its summer camps teach Islamic values rather than focusing solely on leisure and entertainment, as UNRWA does in its camps.

17. As in previous years, the media campaign between Hamas and UNRWA was marked by several incidents of violence against UNRWA's summer camps:³

a. On July 28, **a UNRWA summer camp in the northern Gaza Strip was set on fire**. UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness said that the main stage was damaged and UN flags were torched. The arson took place one day before the campers were planning to try and break a world record in kite flying (Maan News Agency, July 28, 2011).

b. On June 18, **"angry Palestinians" forced UNRWA's summer camps in Khan Younes and Rafah to close** in protest of the organization's failure to fulfill its promise to rebuild destroyed houses. One of the protesters said this was just the first step, and that other UNRWA summer camps would be closed soon (<http://www.paldf.net/>).



The arson at a UNRWA summer camp last year (Al-Resalah, May 24, 2010)

18. Hamas often condemns the harassment of UNRWA's summer camps; **however, so far it has taken no effective, decisive action to put an end to this yearly recurring phenomenon**.

³ For more information on Hamas' summer camps and harassment of UNRWA's summer camps in the past, see our May 26, 2010 Information Bulletin: ["Educating the younger generation in the Gaza Strip: summer camps organized by UNRWA in "competition" with Hamas, are a target for threats and assaults. Armed men recently torched an UNRWA summer camp. Hamas condemned the event but minimized its importance, advising UNRWA to change its ways"](#).