



Mounting tension between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority because of Hamas' efforts to strengthen its status among the Palestinians

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Background

► The growing increase of Hamas' popularity in Palestinian society, at the expense of Fatah, was boosted when Mahmoud Abbas' delayed, and in effect canceled, the Palestinian Authority (PA) parliamentary and presidential elections. It increased further after Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021) when Hamas positioned itself as the "defender" of Jerusalem, the Muslim holy sites and the Palestinian residents of the city. Hamas has been fomenting popular unrest to solidify its position as the Palestinians' main influencer, with tactics including demonstrations of strength in Judea, Samaria and east Jerusalem to undermine security in the PA territories while maintaining relative calm in the Gaza Strip to advance an arrangement with Israel. Hamas would be willing to renew contacts for a reconciliation with Fatah, but from a position of strength. In the meantime, the forces at work in the PA, including Hamas, are making preparations to deploy for the morning after Mahmoud Abbas. Hamas activity is manifested in a number of ways:

► **Encouragement for terrorist attacks:** Senior Hamas figures and the Hamas-affiliated media repeatedly call on the Palestinians in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem to carry out terrorist attacks. Hamas supporters call for attacks in the name of Muhammed Deif, the commander of Hamas' military-terrorist wing and regarded as a symbol of the violent struggle against Israel. Moreover, many of the attacks recently carried out in Judea and Samaria, and especially east Jerusalem, were praised, as were the attackers. In some of the attacks the terrorist was specifically referred to as a Hamas operative, but in no case did Hamas issue an official claim of responsibility for an attack.

► In the meantime, Hamas **makes efforts to operate terrorist networks** in Judea and Samaria. So far, most of the attempted attacks were prevented by Israel, as opposed to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) network, whose operatives carried out a shooting attack near the Israeli committee of Homesh, killing Yehuda Diamantman, a civilian. Given Hamas' escalating efforts, Israel sent the movement a message through the Egyptian security delegation to the Gaza Strip, informing them that terrorist attacks would make Israel

reinstate the targeted killings of senior Hamas figures in the Gaza Strip and abroad, especially those linked to the attacks in Judea and Samaria (al-Akhbar, December 20, 2021). In return Hamas warned Israel not to attack Saleh al-'Arouri, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau and responsible for Hamas activities in Judea and Samaria.

► **Mass events:** Hamas holds mass funerals for shaheeds and receptions for terrorist prisoners released from Israeli jails, including in east Jerusalem and on the Temple Mount, which turn into pro-Hamas demonstrations with green Hamas flags and slogans of support for the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing, and its commander Muhammad Deif. Some of the events are successfully held despite efforts by both Israel and the PA to prevent them, such as the ceremonies held in several universities in Judea and Samaria to mark the 34th anniversary of Hamas' founding.

► **Extensive propaganda activities:** Hamas wages an active propaganda campaign against Israel in the local and Arab media. The Hamas-affiliated media emphasize Hamas' popularity in the West Bank, the slogans chanted in support of the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades and Muhammad Deif, and the importance of the "struggle" in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem. This year Hamas also included the increase in its activities in West Bank and Jerusalem in its anniversary celebrations to emphasize the "role of defender" it has taken upon itself.

► **Increased Hamas presence and influence in the Palestinian street is another challenge to the already-challenged PA.** Hamas undermines the PA's status, attacks its governance capabilities and presents itself to the Palestinians as an alternative to Fatah and the PA. In effect, in recent years the PA's governance capabilities have weakened, as has the control of its security forces over public order in the areas under its authority. That has been particularly obvious in cities like Jenin and Hebron, and on university campuses, where the Islamic Bloc student movement actively represents Hamas.

► The PA makes attempts to limit the spread of Hamas' influence and increase its supervision of the activities of Hamas activists. For example, Mahmoud Abbas instructed the PA security forces to increase preventive detentions of Hamas operatives in the areas under its control. According to reports from Hamas, since May 2021 the PA has detained 200 Hamas-affiliated individuals, most of them journalists and students, most the detentions carried out without authorization from the Palestinian attorney general (al-Risalah Twitter account, December 9, 2021).



Right: al-Risalah, December 9, 2021. Left: The revolving door. The Arabic reads, "The occupied West Bank" (Palestinian cartoonists' Facebook page, December 11, 2021).

- ▶ In an attempt to prevent or neutralize Hamas' effort to cause unrest, PA security force operatives forcibly disperse marches and celebrations for released Hamas operatives, and funerals for shaheeds where Hamas flags are carried. The PA also limited the ceremonies held for the anniversary of Hamas' founding. Sometimes the PA security forces are met with strong resistance, rocks and Molotov cocktails are thrown at them and their activities are savagely criticized by the Hamas-affiliated media. Hamas accused the PA security forces of the chaos in the PA territories and of collaborating with Israel. Hamas claims some of the events are "spontaneous" and caused by the deterioration of security.
- ▶ The confrontation between Hamas and the PA also spread to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. One example was the funeral held in the Burj al-Shamali refugee camp for a Hamas operative killed when a Hamas weapons storeroom under a mosque exploded, attended by members of the Hamas leadership. There were violent clashes between mourners and Fatah operatives, and Hamas operatives were shot at.¹
- ▶ However, Hamas also has difficulties to cope with. So far its efforts to forge an agreement with Israel that will meet expectations in the Gaza Strip has not yet borne fruit. The Gazans still suffer from severe economic hardships despite Israel's measures to ease their lives and the Egyptians' efforts to make headway with rebuilding the Gaza Strip. There has been no particular progress in efforts to formulate a prisoner exchange deal involving terrorist prisoners in Israel jails and the two Israeli captives and the bodies of IDF soldiers held by

¹ For further information, see the December 16, 2021 bulletin, "The explosion of a weapons storehouse in the Burj al-Shemali refugee camp east of Tyre revealed the extent of Hamas' military presence in Lebanon."

Hamas. Moreover, some of the sources of Hamas' income were reduced by Saudi Arabian and British activities. In Judea and Samaria, despite Hamas' attempt to position itself as an alternative to Fatah, according to the results of the last quarter's public opinion poll carried out by Dr. Khalil Shqaqi's Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, despite the lack of public satisfaction with Mahmoud Abbas' functioning and the majority demand for his resignation, Fatah is still more popular than Hamas in the West Bank cities, with 38% in favor of Fatah and 30% in favor of Hamas (PCPSR website, December 14, 2021).

Hamas Activities in the PA

Funerals held for terrorists, prisoners and Palestinians killed in clashes with Israel

The funeral of Wasfi Qabha in Jenin

► One of the major confrontations was in Jenin, in northern Samaria, during the funeral held for Wasfi Qabha', who was formerly PA minister of prisoners' affairs and who died of coronavirus-related causes. The funeral was held on November 12, 2021, in the Jenin refugee camp, and attended by Hamas operatives, some of them masked and armed and many of them waving Hamas flags. The event infuriated Mahmoud Abbas and he ordered operatives of the PA security forces to detain the armed men. He also fired most of the heads of the security forces in the Jenin district. A spokesman for the forces said they were dismissed to improve security in the district (Wafa, November 14, 2021).



Armed Hamas operatives at Wasfi Qabha's funeral (Hamas website, November 12, 2021).

► In the middle of November 2021, immediately after the events **Akram al-Rajoub, governor of the Jenin district**, declared an operation against arms dealers which would include the confiscation of illegal weapons (alresala.net, November 21, 2021). The Palestinian media reported on violent clashes between local Jenin refugee camp residents and the Palestinian

security forces, with exchanges of fire and rocks thrown at security force armed vehicles (QudsN website, November 19, 2021).

► Hamas severely criticized the PA operation, as did other terrorist organizations. **Khaled al-Hajj, a senior Hamas operative in Jenin**, claimed there was no justification for the PA's operation in Jenin because "everyone knew" it had been ordered by Israel, which was displeased by the presence of armed Hamas operatives at the funeral (Palestinian refugees' portal, November 23, 2021).

Other events

► On November 6, 2021, **Muhammad Dadas, 15**, from the new Askar refugee camp in Nablus, was killed. Even though the PIJ claimed he was one of their operatives (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 6, 2021), at the funeral held for him in Nablus green Hamas flags were carried along with black PIJ ones (al-Ghad TV, November 6, 2021).



Hamas and PIJ flags at the funeral (QudsN website, November 6, 2021).

► The funeral of **terrorist operative Fadi Abu Shehidam**, who shot and killed an Israeli civilian in the Old City of Jerusalem, was held in the Shuafat refugee camp in east Jerusalem on November 21, 2021. Local residents, some of whom held Israeli ID cards, marched to his house during the funeral. Many marchers carried Hamas flags and chanted slogans in support of Hamas and Muhammad Deif (Twitter account of Fadi Abu Shehidam's son, November 22, 2021).



Hamas marchers in the Shuafat refugee camp (Palinfo Twitter account, November 23, 2021).

► During the funeral held for **Jamil Abu Ayash**, 31, from the village of Bayta, killed in a clash with the Israeli security forces near the Eviatar outpost, south of Nablus, condemnations of Israel and support for Muhammad Deif were heard (QudsN website, December 11, 2021).

Rallies and demonstrations

► December 14, 2021, marked the 34th anniversary of the founding of the Hamas movement. Hamas announced the main rally in the Gaza Strip would not be held; instead there would be local events. Hamas also planned to mark the date in the PA territories, but given the tension between Hamas and Fatah, the PA prevented the events from turning into another Hamas display.

► On December 17, 2021, the *waqf* in Hebron announced it would close the four mosques in the city before the Friday prayer. It claimed its intention was to increase the number of worshippers in the mosque at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron because of Israel's threats to turn it into a site for Jewish prayers (al-Andalou News, December 17, 2021). In reality, the mosques were apparently closed to prevent them from being used for events marking the anniversary of Hamas' founding.

► According to reports, the previous day the PA security forces carried out a wave of detentions of Hamas operatives and senior activists in Hebron to prevent them from holding the Hamas rally planned for after the Friday prayer (al-Araby al-Jadeed, December 17, 2021).

► **Hamas spokesman Abd al-Latif al-Qanua** condemned the prevention of the Hamas rally in Hebron. He said the PA not only closed mosques but detained activists and issued summons [for interrogations]. The objective, he claimed, was to prevent local residents from expressing their support for the "resistance." He also claimed the PA's activities were a service performed for Israel, and would bring no benefits to the Palestinians (Hamas website, December 16, 2021).

► **Lamay Khater, a Hamas activist from Hebron**, claimed the PA closed the mosques because Hamas was calling for people to go from the Friday prayer to the rally celebrating Hamas' anniversary (Palinfo website, December 16, 2021).

► However, despite the measures against it, Hamas announced it had held a rally in Bayt Ummar, north of Hebron, instead. It was attended by masked Hamas operatives, many holding Hamas flags, who chanted their support for Hamas and its military-terrorist wing (al-Araby al-Jadeed, December 17, 2021).



The alternate rally held in Bayt Ummar (al-Araby al-Jadeed, December 17, 2021).

► On December 14, 2021, students belonging to the Islamic Bloc, Hamas' student faction, held a ceremony at Birzeit University to mark the anniversary. It was held despite IDF activities during the night which included entering the university and detaining wanted Islamic Bloc operatives (QudsN Twitter account, December 14, 2021).



The Hamas-affiliated Islamic Bloc in Birzeit University marks the anniversary of the movement's founding (QudsN Twitter account, December 14, 2021).

Receptions held for released prisoners

► In recent weeks the PA security forces oversaw the celebrations held for terrorist prisoners released from jail, which turned into Hamas displays of force. For instance, Hamas flags were waved at the celebration held at the al-Aida refugee camp for a released prisoner. The PA

security forces fired shots to disperse it. The security forces also attacked the reception line for released prisoner Mu'tassem Zaloum in the al-Bireh refugee camp on November 21, 2021.

► On December 12, 2021, there were reports of clashes between Hamas operatives and PA security forces in a number of locations in the Jenin, Tulkarm and Bethlehem districts. The Palestinian media reported the clashes broke out when the security forces "attacked" the celebration held in one of the refugee camps for the release of a Hamas-affiliated prisoner. The Hamas-affiliated media documented clashes in the refugee camps in the Jenin and Bethlehem districts where PA security force operatives were seen forcibly suppressing the events (Shehab, December 12, 2021).

► On December 14, 2021, Amir Issa al-Ladawi was wounded at a reception held in the Aqabat Jaber refugee camp in Jericho for the release of senior Hamas figure Sheikh Shagr Amara (PIJ Telegram channel, December 15, 2021). Hamas claimed the security forces chased his vehicle because he had was carrying a Hamas flag, and as a result his vehicle overturned and he was injured. Hamas also claimed the PA security forces prevented medical help from reaching him, and as a result, he died in a hospital seven days later (Filastin al-Yawm, December 22, 2021).

► **Sheikh Shagr Amara** also accused the PA for deliberately trying to ruin the celebration held for his release from an Israeli jail.



Right: Amir al-Ladawi (Hamas website, December 22, 2021). Left: al-Ladawi's vehicle after it overturned during the chase (Filastin al-Yawm, December 15, 2021).



The funeral held for Amir al-Ladawi by Hamas in the Aqabat Jaber refugee camp (QudsN website, December 22, 2021).

Encouragement for terrorist attacks and terrorist operatives

► Many recent terrorist attacks in Judea and Samaria, and especially in Jerusalem, were widely praised, as were the terrorists who carried them out. In some cases the terrorist was reported as a Hamas operative who had carried out the attack on his own initiative. Despite Hamas' claim of the operative's affiliation with Hamas, **on no occasion did Hamas issue an official claim of responsibility for the attack.**

► For example:

◆ **Shooting attack in the Old City of Jerusalem, November 21, 2021:** The attack resulted in the death of an Israeli civilian. Hamas issued a mourning notice for the terrorist, stating that Sheikh Fadi Mahmoud Abu Shekhidam was "a senior Hamas operative in the Shuafat refugee camp and had carried out a heroic action, killing and wounding enemy soldiers [sic]." **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau,** spoke on the phone with his family and praised him. Haniyeh said he and Hamas were proud of the men of the "resistance" [i.e., terrorist operatives], and that Abu Shekhidam had "defended al-Aqsa mosque" (SerajSat Telegram channel, November 22, 2021).



Hamas flags and mourning notice hung on the house of Abu Shehidam (Palinfo Twitter account, November 21, 2021).

- ◆ **Stabbing attack on Hagai Street in the Old City of Jerusalem, November 17, 2021:** Two Border Police fighters were injured in the attack. The attacker was apparently a lone wolf terrorist, although he was 16 years old, but nevertheless Hamas rushed to issue a mourning notice for "the death of its shaheed son" (Hariya Press, November 17, 2021).



Hamas mourning notice (Hariya Press, November 17, 2021).

Detention of Hamas operatives

- Another indication of Hamas' increasing activity in the PA territories is the Israeli security force detentions of Hamas operatives. During the past few months an extensive Hamas network was exposed in Judea and Samaria. According to the Israeli Security Agency, a dangerous terrorist network was prevented from carrying out mass-casualty showcase attacks (IDF spokesman, Israeli Security Agency, November 22, 2021).

- ▶ A network handled by Hamas operatives abroad planned to carry out terrorist attacks in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem, as well as mass-casualty showcase attacks inside Israeli territory. The Israeli security forces operated in several locations in Judea and Samaria and detained more than 50 Hamas network operatives. Weapons and the equipment for manufacturing IEDs (including enough explosives for three to four explosive belts) were found in their possession. Funds were also confiscated.
- ▶ Hamas leader **Saleh al-'Arouri, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau and responsible for the West Bank**, who operates abroad, funds and directs Hamas activities.
- ▶ It was not the first Hamas network exposed in Judea and Samaria directed by Hamas operatives in the Gaza Strip and abroad. Hamas needs to use Arab-Muslim countries as local headquarters for handling terrorist networks in Judea and Samaria because its headquarters were expelled from Damascus in the wake of the Syrian Civil War. Hamas' desire for military-terrorist involvement in Judea, Samaria and east Jerusalem became more urgent after Operation Protective Edge and especially after Operation Guardian of the Walls.
- ▶ During Israeli intelligence services' previous interrogations of terrorist operatives the names of such countries as Turkey, Qatar, Jordan and Malaysia were mentioned as sites for locating, recruiting, directing, funding and training terrorist operatives from Judea and Samaria. In the past Saudi Arabia was also mentioned as a meeting place exploited for recruiting operatives and transferring funds to Judea and Samaria by virtue of Mecca's status as a site for Muslim pilgrimages. Sometimes terrorist networks in Judea and Samaria are directed from more than one country, depending on their convenience as a site for operations (terrorist network handlers who live in distant countries like to meet their operatives in "middleman countries" close to Israel, like Turkey and Jordan).