



Hamas summer camps in the Gaza Strip

August 13, 2023

Overview

- ▶ As during the past several summers, Hamas again organized summer camps, attended by about 100 thousand children and teenagers and this year called "Defender of Jerusalem." According to Hamas, the name was chosen to bring the issues of Jerusalem and Palestinian national identity to the fore and make the younger generation aware of their importance. The summer camps provided three types of programs and activities: military and semi-military training, ideological indoctrination and Qur'an studies and memorization.
- ▶ The opening ceremony was held at the Asdaa City theme park in the western part of Khan Yunis. The park was built on the lands of Gush Katif settlements abandoned during Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The location is significant for the Palestinians and choosing it for the opening ceremony was most likely not random.
- ▶ The Hamas summer camps are organized by the Supreme Summer Camp Committee, headed by senior Hamas figure Muhammad Abu Askar. The committee launched a Facebook page for the camps but it was active for only a few days before it was removed or blocked. Therefore, unlike previous years, there is relatively little documentation of the camps' activities. In addition symbols and logos of Hamas and the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, its military-terrorist wing, have been blurred or downplayed. Also unlike other years, so far there has been no information about the camps' final date or closing ceremony, which in the past were attended by senior Hamas figures and received widespread media coverage.
- ▶ The reason for media silence regarding the camps is unknown, but might be the result of the publicity they received on Israeli TV, including an investigative report aired on Israel's Channel 13 in early July 2023. The program received wide media coverage and may have caused Hamas to downplay details about this year's summer camps. The Hamas-affiliated Shehab website quoted the Israeli report with the title, "Summer camps in Gaza under Israeli media surveillance" (Shehab, July 13, 2023).

▶ Hamas is not the only movement holding summer camps in the Gaza Strip. UNRWA also organized camps this year in 91 agency centers and schools throughout the Gaza Strip for 130 thousand children and teenagers. Hamas views UNRWA and its summer camps as its main competition. In the past, Hamas tried to influence the UNRWA camps' programs and activities, criticizing them for being coeducational. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) also held summer camps where military and semi-military training took place.¹ The PLO-subordinate Supreme Council for Youth Affairs and Sports also organized a number of summer camps.

▶ Summer camps organized by the Palestinian Authority (PA) were held in Judea, Samaria and East Jerusalem, some of them (mainly in East Jerusalem) organized and managed by the PLO's Supreme Council (al-Hayat al-Jadeeda, July 12, 2023). The PA also held summer camps in the various districts organized by the National Committee for Summer Camps, managed and supervised by **PA senior figure Musa Abu Ziyad, the chairman of the Palestinian Authority's employees' office** (National Committee Facebook page, July 13, 2023).

Further Information

Registration

▶ Registration was held in mosques and registration sites throughout the Gaza Strip beginning on June 21, 2023 and lasting for a week (Islamic Bloc website, June 21, 2023). Signs indicating Hamas involvement, such as the movement's logo, were deleted from photos of registration sites.

¹ For further information see the June 30, 2023 ITIC report, "The Palestinian Islamic Jihad opens military training camps for adolescents."



Summer camp registration site in the Qarara area east of Khan Yunis. The Hamas symbol on the sign was deliberately deleted (Facebook page of the Defender of Jerusalem camps in the Qarara area, June 26, 2023)

The opening ceremony

► On July 8, 2023, the opening ceremonies of the Hamas summer camps were held. More than 100 thousand children and teenagers attended them. The Supreme Committee of the Summer Camps held a press conference for the event, where **Muhammad Abu Askar, senior Hamas figure and committee chairman**,² said that this year's summer camps would be named Defender of Jerusalem to emphasize to the world that Jerusalem and its holy shrines where the Palestinians' "compass." He added that the name was also chosen to instill in the hearts of young people the importance of Jerusalem and the Palestinians' right to it, and to awaken the younger generation's awareness of its own national role as the generation of "liberation." According to Abu Askar, Hamas was interested in and was in fact acting among the younger generation because Israel and its collaborators [allegedly] invested a great deal of effort and money to dissociate Palestinian youth from their religion and homeland (Palestine Online, July 8, 2023).

► **Hamas spokesman Abd al-Latif al-Qanua** called the summer camps an important station on the road to building the next generation and placing Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque in their hearts. He added that the camps were called Defender of Jerusalem to emphasize Jerusalem's importance and the need to prepare to liberate it from from the "occupiers who desecrate it" (Khabar Press, July 12, 2023).

² Muhammad Abu Askar is a senior Hamas figure who is deputy minister of labor and often comments publicly on political issues and participates in demonstrations and rallies. Appointing him to head the committee responsible for the summer camps is an indication of the importance Hamas assigns to them.



Right: The press conference announcing the opening of the summer camps. Left: The Defender of Jerusalem 2023 summer camps' logo (Islamic Bloc website, June 21, 2023).



The opening ceremony of the summer camp in Rafah. Flags of the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing, appear in the logo (Palinfo, July 8, 2023).

Defender of Jerusalem programs

► Unlike the UNRWA camps, which according to the agency are intended for enjoyment and recreation, the Hamas summer camps include a variety of programs and activities, including:

- ◆ **Military training**, including the theoretical and practical study of weapons, firing live ammunition at targets and training for urban warfare. The training was supervised by Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades terrorist operatives. In photos documenting the training most of the activists were masked and Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades symbols were deliberately obliterated (see below).
- ◆ **Semi-military training**, including physical fitness, first aid training, firefighting in emergencies and escalation in the Gaza Strip.
- ◆ **Indoctrination**, where campers participated in a demonstration of support for the "resistance" [terrorist organizations] in Judea and Samaria and al-Aqsa Mosque.

Activities also included anti-Israeli incitement, and children were photographed treading on pictures of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir and Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich. In another incident, a child was photographed aiming a gun at their photos (Facebook page of the Defender of Jerusalem camp in the Qarara area, July 17, 2023)

◆ **Qur'an study and memorization.**

Military training



Right: Learning how to shoot, first day of the summer camps in the Sheikh Radwan area in the western part of Gaza City. Left: Military-terrorist wing operatives give firearms instructions in the western part of Gaza City (Facebook page of Defender of Jerusalem camps, July 9, 2023).



Right: A reception held by Hamas military-terrorist wing operatives for the campers. Left: Using a gun, taught by a masked Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades terrorist operative at a summer camp in the Qarara area (Facebook page of the Defender of Jerusalem camps in the Qarara area, July 17, 2023).



Right: Learning how to shoot, supervised by an Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades operative in the Shejaiya neighborhood in the eastern part of Gaza City. Left: Shooting with a laser scope rifle at a summer camp in the Shejaiya neighborhood in eastern Gaza City (Shejaiya Media Facebook page, July 14, 2023).



Right: Fence-climbing training in western Khan Yunis (Palestine Online, July 8, 2023). Left: Urban warfare training at a camp in the Shejaiya neighborhood in eastern Gaza City (Shejaiya Media Facebook page, July 14, 2023)

Preparations for emergencies



Civil Defense training: extinguishing fires and dealing with emergencies (Facebook page of the Defender of Jerusalem camps in the southern Gaza Strip, July 17, 2023)

Indoctrination



A march in support of the "resistance" in the western part of Gaza City, with the participation of children from the Hamas summer camps (Safa, July 12, 2023).



Right: Campers walk on pictures of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Minister of National Security Ben-Gvir and Minister of Finance Smotrich. From the left: A boy points a rifle at pictures of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Minister of National Security Ben Gabir and Minister of Finance Smotrich (Facebook page of the Defender of Jerusalem camp in the Qarara area, July 17, 2023)

Qur'an studies



Qur'an studies at Hamas summer camps in Gaza (Shehab Twitter account, July 8, 2023)

Senior Hamas officials visit the camps in the northern Gaza Strip

► A delegation of senior Hamas figures and members of the Legislative Council visited the summer camps in the northern Strip. **Musheir al-Masri**, a senior Hamas figure who

participated in the visit, said that "the next generation[...] is the generation of strength and freedom, who will liberate their land and holy sites from the desecration of the occupier." He also claimed the summer camps built "devout Muslim youth who 'struggle against' the occupation" (Gaza Legislative Council website, August 1, 2023).



Senior Hamas officials visit the summer camps in the northern Gaza Strip (Gaza Legislative Council website, August 1, 2023)