

# -A narrow dominion? Gaza's Salafi-Jihadis in the fallout of the Arab Spring

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# Abstract

As the Arab Spring unfolded in the early months of 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa, the international Salafi-Jihadi movement would rise in importance on the local, regional and international agenda. Gazan Jihadists, while often in quarrel with the ruling party Hamas, had until the Arab Spring been described as having no “operational” or “organizational” ties to the international Jihadist community. After 2011, and the burgeoning of Salafi-Jihadi groups which had germinated out of Al-Qaida branches, some features of the local Gazan groups have evolved. This thesis argues that although there is continuity in the trajectories of some of the Gazan Salafi-Jihadis, there is also a dramatic change in their violent behaviour possibly beginning before 2011, but coming into fruition in the period following the Arab Spring.

This analysis seeks to shed light on developments and trends in an important subject in the Middle East, potentially having serious consequence for the international Jihadist movement. The dissertation is meant as a contribution to the study of armed groups and intra-rebel dynamics. It seeks to discuss the trajectories of Salafi-Jihadism in general, and to shed light on these trajectories for rebel groups operating in a context of foreign occupation, as well as an Islamist government in particular.

***“Know that what the Muslims gain from jihad in these days is many times greater [than] what they gain through years of political tampering and protests and meetings with delegations and negotiations [...]”***

“Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem”,  
Gaza-based Jihadist group, November, 2012<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SITE Intelligence group: “MSC in Jerusalem Urges Jihad in Wake of Israeli Campaign in Gaza,” 3. November, 27, 2012

# Foreword

First of all I would like to thank my supervisor, Brynjar Lia, for thorough feedback and help throughout the writing process. This study could not have been realized without the help of Dag Tuastad, Erik Skare, Berit Thorbjørnsrud and Jacob Høigilt, whose inputs and comments in the early and mid-stage of the process has been highly valuable. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow students for our discussions and study environment.

## List of abbreviations and synonyms

The armed groups which will be discussed in this paper are often transcribed or translated differently. Here follows a list of some of the most used synonyms and aliases, as well as other abbreviations present in the text.

<b>Gaza –</b>	The Gaza Strip.
<b>ABM –</b>	Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis /Ansar Jerusalem/ Supporters of Jerusalem
<b>GTD –</b>	Global Terrorism Database
<b>ICT–</b>	International Institute for Counter-Terrorism
<b>IDF–</b>	Israel Defense Forces
<b>IS –</b>	The Islamic State / Al-Dawla Al-Islamiyya / Daesh / [previously] ISIS/ISIL
<b>Jaysh al-Islam–</b>	Jaish al-Islam / Army of Islam
<b>Jaysh al-Ummah–</b>	Army of the [Muslim] Nation
<b>Jund Ansar Allah –</b>	Soldiers of God’s Supporters /Warriors of God
<b>LWJ–</b>	Long War Journal
<b>MENA –</b>	Middle East and North Africa

<b>MSC –</b>	Mujahideen Shura Council / Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem / MSCEJ
<b>PA –</b>	Palestinian Authority
<b>PIJ –</b>	Palestinian Islamic Jihad/ Islamic Jihad
<b>PRC –</b>	Popular Resistance Committees
<b>Wilayat Sina’ –</b>	Sinai Province/Province of Sinai / WS / Islamic State, Sinai Province

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# 1. Introduction

On Wednesday, January 3, 2018 a Gazan-Egyptian extremist group named “The Islamic State, Sinai province” released a propaganda video declaring war on Hamas; “the Islamic Resistance Movement” governing the Gaza Strip. At the end of the video, a man who was reportedly a Hamas member is executed. While radical Jihadi groups in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have routinely criticized Hamas ever since the latter gained political power in Gaza in the mid-2000s, physically attacking Hamas was almost unheard of until the Arab Spring. The execution portrayed in the propaganda video, being the latest in a series of violent attacks against the Hamas government, prompts the question of the incentive for Jihadi groups to attack Hamas personnel now. Has there been a change in the nature of Salafi-Jihadi groups of Gazan origin, and if so, why?

In order to shed light on this apparent development in the practices of Gazan Jihadi groups during the last years, this paper looks at two periods in recent history, the years immediately preceding and following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010/2011. While physically isolated by Israel and Egypt, Gaza and its population are not untouched by the regional developments, including the international developments in Salafi-Jihadi movements. In light of the resurgence of Salafi-Jihadi activities following the fall of authoritarian leaders in the region (coincidentally at the same time as the assassination of Osama bin Laden), it is relevant

to see how the Salafi-Jihadi movement in Gaza has developed during this period.<sup>2</sup> To what degree does the movement follow its previous patterns of behaviour? Has the movement deviated from these patterns? Have the Arab uprisings and their side effects combined with the sudden and dramatic rise of the “Islamic State” stimulated and inspired radical groups also in Gaza?

To answer these questions we must look at the regional context, as the collapse of the relative order set by the authoritarian regimes, such as in Libya, Egypt and Syria had different fallouts. On the one hand this collapse facilitated new phenomena, like a generational enthusiasm which demanded change and dignity and the fall of the old systems. At the same time the MENA region saw the unrest and the insurgencies in Iraq spilling over to and mutating in Syria. In Libya, the fall of the Gadhafi-regime created deep power vacuums in the country, leading to proliferation of weapons from the regime’s arsenals.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore this was also the first time an Islamist president was elected in one of the most critical states in the region, Egypt. This very president was toppled through a military coup seemingly approved by western powers, which again fueled the Jihadi narrative in a crucial way: It proved for many that a peaceful transition to Islamic rule was impossible, and that armed struggle was the only viable option.<sup>4</sup>

## **1.1 Relevance of study, selected relevant work, research question and the choice of the Arab Spring as demarcation**

A number of articles and studies published in the years ahead of and following the Arab Spring presented Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza as a small, but growing threat. Analyses are plenty<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although I refer to the Salafi-Jihadists as a “movement”, it is evident that this group of people is not structured as one group; rather, when I use this term, I mean a group of people with a similar ideology working individually or in tandem to achieve certain goals.

<sup>3</sup> Zohar, “The Flow of Arms into the Gaza Strip.”

<sup>4</sup> See Gilkes, “‘Then Kill the Pagans Wherever You Find Them’: The Emerging Trend of Islamic State Networks Targeting Christians in Egypt,” 139-140. ; SITE Intelligence Group, “Jihadis Look For Gains In Egypt, Call For Armed Uprising.”

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Cunningham, “Growing Threat to Hamas.”: “Gazans who think it has sold out” (2009); Mitnick, “Salafis’ Rise in Gaza Robs Hamas of Resistance Banner.”(2012); Milton-Edwards, “Islamist Versus Islamist.”: “Rising challenge in Gaza”; (2014) Carlstrom, “Is the Islamic State on the Rise in Gaza?”(2015)



with titles like “Jihadist Groups in Gaza: A Developing threat”(2009)<sup>6</sup>, “The Expansion of Al-Qaida-Affiliated Jihadi Groups in Gaza” (2010)<sup>7</sup>, “The growth of Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza and consequences for the peace process” (2011)<sup>8</sup>, “Religious Fundamentalism Growing in Gaza”(2013)<sup>9</sup>, “How Salafism’s rise threatens Gaza” (2017)<sup>10</sup>, “Growing Salafi-Jihadism and internal tensions in the Gaza Strip” (2018).<sup>11</sup>

The Salafi-Jihadi phenomenon in Gaza is important for several reasons, as the study of armed extremist groups of any denomination is an important part of safeguarding society. While Islam-inspired groups are not the only armed extremist groups active in the MENA region today, they are among the most notorious, and deserve our attention. As the situation in Palestine and the Palestine-Israel conflict is one of the most protracted and debated conflicts in the world, analyzing and assessing trends involving Gaza-based armed groups is highly relevant.

### **Selected relevant works**

Among those who have studied these groups are scholars who have had Hamas and Gaza as a main focus, but whose studies have included the Salafi-Jihadis, as they are an essential part of Gazan society. Notable among these are Beverly Milton-Edwards,<sup>12</sup> writing extensively<sup>13</sup> on securitization, rebel governance and political Islam, and whose works feature among the analyses studied for this dissertation. Several research reports have been written for journals connected to official or security establishments<sup>14</sup>, the analyses based on various empirical material, statistics, news reporting and statements from experts, sometimes local, with the material not necessarily produced for that report exclusively. While valuable, these might share some flaws due to the fact that certain empirical material on this topic can be difficult to obtain. The result is that these (and other analyses, such as leaked

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen, “Jihadist Groups in Gaza.”

<sup>7</sup> Gold, “The Expansion of Al-Qaيدا-Affiliated Jihadi Groups in Gaza.”

<sup>8</sup> Maggs, “The Growth of Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza and Consequences for the Peace Process.”

<sup>9</sup> The Real News Network, “Religious Fundamentalism Growing in Gaza.”

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, “How Salafism’s Rise Threatens Gaza.”

<sup>11</sup> Brenner, “Growing Salafi-Jihadism and Internal Tensions in the Gaza Strip.”

<sup>12</sup> Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*.

<sup>13</sup> Queen’s University Belfast Research Portal, “Beverley Milton-Edwards - Publications -.”

<sup>14</sup> See for instance, Hovdenak, “Al-Qaida - a Challenge for Hamas?”; Berti, “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat”; Landinfo, “Palestina: Væpnede Grupper På GazaStripen.”

communications from intelligence agencies<sup>15</sup>, opinion pieces or news articles<sup>16</sup>) often refer to the same few sources, for example when assessing the size of the Salafi-Jihadi movement<sup>17</sup>. While this is not necessarily a problem in itself, it would be a mistake to assume a consensus around specific numbers or facts, if many of the analyses refer to the same source, which in turn might depend on a single statement by a local observer.

Notably among more recent scholarship is an in depth study of Hamas' governance in Gaza, wherein the knowledge of the Salafi-Jihadi component of Gazan society is based substantially on the author's own empirical findings such as field work observations and interviews, a lot of them conducted in situ. Another significant secondary source is an in depth study of the Sinai Peninsula conducted in 2015, based in large part on the author's own interviews.<sup>18 19</sup>

### Why the Arab Spring?

The choice of the Arab Spring as the demarcation line between two periods of time demands some further elaboration. In early 2011, the MENA region underwent massive and irreversible change, as popular uprisings led to a series of overthrows of state leaders, as well as great unrest and civil wars. Relevant for our study are the following theatres of conflict, in particular:

In Egypt, the toppling of the Mubarak regime in February 2011 led to political chaos and a transformed security situation allowing the outbreak of the *Sinai insurgency*. The ousting of President Muhammed Mursi by a military coup led to a severing of ties between Hamas and their Egyptian supporters.<sup>20</sup> The new military dictatorship has conducted a series of operations restricting movement back and forth between Egypt and Gaza, at the same time as steadily raising the stakes in the Sinai insurgency by delegating large portions of its

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<sup>15</sup>See for instance, Wikileaks- The Global Intelligence Files, "[CT] DISCUSSION - Militant Groups In Gaza and Their Challenge to Hamas."

<sup>16</sup> See for instance, Issacharoff, "Elite Hamas Fighters Defecting to Islamic State"; The Real News Network, "Religious Fundamentalism Growing in Gaza."

<sup>17</sup>See for instance, Berti, "Hamas' Internal Challenge: The Political and Ideological Impact of Violent Salafist Groups in Gaza."

<sup>18</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*.

<sup>19</sup> Sabry, *Sinai*.

<sup>20</sup> Ezbid, "'Arab Spring': Weather Forecast for Palestine."

military and police forces to the area, seeking to obtain control which had been left effectively to local “vigilante” groups in 2011.<sup>21</sup> Far from ending the negative development in the Sinai, the Egyptian military deployment has resulted in a direr situation: Sinai has been turned into a more violent area. Furthermore, this deployment is fueling Jihadist narratives of the oppressing secular state<sup>22</sup>, at the same time as making Sinai a target-rich environment for those seeking to attack Egyptian military and police personnel<sup>23</sup>, be they armed groups consisting of disenfranchised Bedouins<sup>24</sup>, or extremist insurgency groups, the latter having been active in the area for years.<sup>25</sup>

In Syria, the civil war that ensued after the civil uprisings in the summer of 2011 opened up for a many-faceted conflict, wherein some elements, such as Jihadist insurgency groups from the conflict in Iraq spilled over into the Syrian theatre. As a result of this, the prominence, growth and success of certain Salafi-Jihadi groups became a reality, the most salient one being ISIS (later renamed IS) in 2013-2014.

In Libya, the uprisings and ensuing NATO intervention led to a ruinous civil war and the implosion of the central power. This in turn led to a loss of control over the Libyan state’s huge weapons’ arsenal, allegedly ranging from small arms to anti-aircraft rockets, which ended up in the hands of smugglers bringing them to armed groups in a number of places, including Sinai and Gaza, to both non-Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi groups.<sup>26</sup>

As such, the Arab Spring did not influence developments in Gaza as much or in the same fashion as it did in other MENA countries, with popular uprisings against their non-elected leaders. However, the sudden change in Gazan realities due to the power shifts in Egypt, and the outbreak of the Sinai insurgency, the mushrooming of ISIS/IS as a global Jihadist movement, and the flow of looted Libyan arms had serious repercussions for Gazan Salafi-

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<sup>21</sup> Sabry, *Sinai*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, ABM published a video message decrying the actions of the Egyptian military in September 2013, apparently appealing to the viewer’s emotions by presenting personal tragedies through interviews, as well as the corpses of children after what is allegedly Egyptian military operations, see Jamā’at Anṣār Bayt al-Maqdis, “Visual Documentation for the Crimes of the Army In Its Extended Campaign Upon the Sinai In the Period From September 9-13, 2013.” [Warning: extreme graphics] [Arabic]

<sup>23</sup> For instance, ABM published a video message, showing a fighter shooting down a military helicopter in late January 2014, see Jamā’at Anṣār Bayt al-Maqdis, “Fight Them Until There Is No [More] Fitnah #3: Shooting Down a Military Helicopter.” [Arabic]

<sup>24</sup> Herman, “Sisi, the Sinai and Salafis.”

<sup>25</sup> Wikileaks- Public Library of US Diplomacy, “CODEL HOEKSTRA’S MEETING WITH EGYPTIAN GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SERVICE DIRECTOR SOLIMAN [Cable ID: 05CAIRO6447\_a].”

<sup>26</sup> Sabry, *Sinai*, 79-80.

Jihadi groups. This, I could have called what I believe to be two phases, “phase one and two”, but I believe that the possible development patterns discussed here to be connected to the shifting realities described above, i.e. the political and social fallout of the Arab Spring.

### *Research question*

Thus, the research question of this analysis is: ***How has the armed activity of the Salafi-Jihadi movement in Gaza developed in the years following the Arab Spring? Why have we seen a sudden change in some groups’ target selection?***

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Source material

A substantial amount of academic and opinion pieces have been written on the topic of extremist activity in the Palestinian territories in recent years, and the source material employed for this study is a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are largely comprised of statistics of armed activity in the region, and political statements and online chatter published by Salafi-Jihadi groups. The secondary sources are mainly analyses conducted by think tanks, media monitoring companies, intelligence agencies and academics in the field of Middle East or security studies; as well as other academic and news articles.

Most of the sources studied for this thesis are openly available in books and journals, or from online sources, such as a number of academic and news articles, opinion polls and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Some primary sources however, requires subscription for online access, such as the Salafi-Jihadi statements collected and provided by “SITE Intelligence Group”; or are sometimes blocked in some countries like the open access web blog Jihadology.net.<sup>27</sup> The latter is at the time of writing openly accessible from Norway.

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<sup>27</sup> Paraszczuk, “Russia Blocks Blogs By Western Analysts Tracking IS.”; Shashidhar, “Government Blocks Jihadology, an Academic Site on Source Material from Jihadis.”

## 2.2 Analytical approach

For this study, I have selected a number of analyses of Salafi-Jihadi groups in Gaza written in the years before and after the Arab Spring. I have divided them around the spring of 2011, the earliest being from the mid-2000s, and the latest from early 2018.

Likewise, I have collected a number of news articles treating the same or related issues, and divided them in the same way; both to build general knowledge of the development in Gaza, but also to see how key events were interpreted at the time they took place.

Furthermore, I have studied the data of terrorist incidents in the region as provided by the reputable database of the GTD, in order to determine the scope and the development in armed activities, as the database documents violent actions conducted by non-state actors up until the end of 2016.<sup>28</sup> I have divided the relevant incidents into two segments, one from 2005-2010 and the second from 2011-2016, with more detailed methodology described in relevant chapters. As these primary data are important to assess violent activity, I have devoted them substantial space in the respective chapters.

Finally, I have studied statements that have been published by Gazan Salafi-Jihadi groups themselves, be they in written form published online, or audio- or videotaped statements published in online forums, or online newspapers. These publications have also been divided into pre- and post-2011 sections like the other sources. In the subchapters 4.4.1 and 5.4.1 I have included two selected publications to serve as case studies of Salafi-Jihadi rhetoric. These provide examples of Jihadi groups' communication in the pre- and post-Arab Spring period, and may serve to exemplify the zeitgeists of the two periods.

To explore the sources employed for this study, I have categorized the research question into five selected factors which may serve to inform us about the trajectories of the Gazan Salafi-Jihadi movement. These factors are chosen not only to utilize the sources more systematically, but also for the sake of clarity in analyzing the development in Gaza's Salafi-Jihadi movement. If Salafi-Jihadism is "on the rise", as many observers claim, in what way are they developing, and what impact can be said to be due to the Arab Spring? Who are the

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of GTD's selection criteria, see Global Terrorism Database, "Data Collection Methodology."

actors; how many are they; what are they saying, and what are they doing? The factors I have selected to approach and answer these questions serve as the structural basis for chapter 4, 5 and 6, and are the following:

- **Groups:** What Salafi-Jihadi groups are deemed most prominent, and have formerly important groups lost their relevance and been replaced by new ones?
- **Size:** What can we say about the size of the Salafi-Jihadi groups and the size of the Salafi-Jihadi movement in total, and has it changed?
- Salafi-Jihadi **recruitment:** what type of individuals (nationality, previous affiliations) do the groups consist of? Has this changed, and if so, how?
- Salafi-Jihadi groups' **enemy hierarchy:** What development can be observed in Salafi-Jihadi arrangement of their own enemies? This is largely based on an assessment of the groups' rhetoric, available in their publications and online chatter as well as in academic analyses.
- Salafi Jihadi **target selection:** To what degree have the target preferences of Salafi-Jihadi armed activity changed? Can this be connected to changes in their enemy hierarchy?

Target selection is particularly important when studying armed groups. According to one analyst, violence is the “most easily observable form of political behaviour”<sup>29</sup>, and is thus a very important factor in our study, especially in combination with studies of enemy hierarchies.<sup>30</sup> Even if one might disagree on the definition of concepts like *terrorism*, the fact is that armed groups communicate most efficiently through violence, be it the “language” of terrorism<sup>31</sup>, a “cultural performance”<sup>32</sup>, or as a measure of “propaganda of the deed”.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries?”, 245.

<sup>30</sup> Hegghammer, “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups,” 28.

<sup>31</sup> O’Ballance, *Language of Violence*.; Smith et al., “The Language of Violence.”

<sup>32</sup> Abufarha, *The Making of a Human Bomb*, 223.

<sup>33</sup> Logue, “Propaganda of the Deed - How Insurgents Are Seizing the Initiative in the Information Environment.”

## 3. Context

### 3.1 Gaza: recent history and status quo

The Gaza Strip is an area in the Palestinian Territories with a total area of about 365 square km. With an estimated population of about 1,8 million, Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas on the planet.

Being one of the original areas designated for Palestinian control in the UN separation plan, it nevertheless ended up under Egyptian control from 1948 until the 1967 war, when the Israeli military occupation began, and the borders became more defined. This did not end the close connection between the Gazan population and the nearby Egyptians, especially in the northern Sinai. In the mid-1990s, the Palestinian authorities gained control over most of the Gaza Strip following the Oslo Accords. During the second intifada (2000-2005) Israel began constructing the physical separation measures between Israeli territory and Gaza present today.

The situation in Gaza is exceptional. In 2005, Israel relocated its troops out of Gaza, and with the removal of the Israeli settlers from the area, declared an end to the military occupation, yet in effect began a siege and blockade of the area instead. With the Israeli-Egyptian control over the land borders, border crossings, access to the sea and airspace, Gazans are essentially at the mercy of foreign entities, especially as Israel reserves for itself the right to enter Gaza with military forces whenever it deems it necessary.

In January 2006, Hamas participated in the election for the Palestinian Legislative Council –the legislature of the Palestinian Authority (PA) – for the first time and won a landslide victory. Hamas, which originated as an Islamic resistance movement during the first intifada (1987-1991) had seen its popularity grow during the second intifada in the early 2000s. Following the election victory and ensuing conflict, a short lived unity government was formed between Hamas and Fatah in February 2007, but this cooperation ended already in June, following clashes between the respective parties' armed divisions, culminating in the ousting of Fatah from power by Hamas forces. This “victory” by Hamas was received with

mixed reactions from Salafists at home and abroad<sup>34</sup>, including congratulations, notably from Al-Qaida's Ayman al-Zawahiri, who urged Hamas to join the "ranks of the Mujahideen"<sup>35 36</sup>. This statement followed a previous call to the "brothers" within the movement not to accept PA negotiations with Israel, already indicating an ambivalent approach to the situation.<sup>37</sup> Other Salafi-Jihadis, however, were not pleased with Hamas taking part in democratic elections in the first place, and this would be a source of contention from that point onwards.

### The Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident

The ambivalent relationship between the emerging Salafi-Jihadi movement and Hamas deteriorated over the next couple of years. In 2009, a line was crossed by a local Salafi-Jihadi group. In mid-August of that year, a group called Jund Ansar Allah declared the founding of an "Islamic emirate" in Palestine, following a sermon in the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque in the south western town of Rafah, and called upon local Muslims to join them with arms. Jund Ansar Allah had previously fought alongside Hamas during the Israeli bombardment called "Operation Cast Lead" (one of Jund Ansar Allah's founders was a Qassam Brigades' <sup>38</sup> instructor held in high esteem<sup>39</sup>). The ensuing ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas led to frustration among Salafi-Jihadi groups and many of the Qassam fighters, who had opposed previous ceasefires.<sup>40</sup> As to be expected, the ceasefire agreement did not go down well with the leadership in Jund Ansar Allah either.<sup>41</sup>

In their effort of maintaining this hard fought truce with Israel, Hamas did not look well upon the Salafi-Jihadi groups' aggressive behaviour in the following months. When members of Jund Ansar Allah fled the area of a bombing attack on a local wedding in July, Hamas police pursued them, and confiscated weapons found in the members' homes. This in turn was met by warnings against Hamas should they act against the group.<sup>42</sup> As per usual,<sup>43</sup> Hamas tried

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<sup>34</sup> Paz, "Salafi-Jihadi Responses to the Hamas' Electoral Victory," 49-51.

<sup>35</sup> The "Mujahideen" refers to people who are engaged in Jihad, usually a praiseworthy title.

<sup>36</sup> Hovdenak, "Al-Qaida - a Challenge for Hamas?", 38.

<sup>37</sup> Levitt, "Hamas's Ideological Crisis," 89.

<sup>38</sup> The Qassam Brigades is usually regarded as the armed wing of Hamas.

<sup>39</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Spyer, "Analysis: Al-Qaida-Style Extremism Gains Real Power within Hamas."; Cohen, Levitt, and Wasser, "Deterred but Determined: Salafi-Jihadi Groups in the Palestinian Arena," 15.

<sup>41</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 88-89.

<sup>42</sup> International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Gaza," 11-12.



to ease tensions with this group through mediation by Hamas' own clerics. On August 14<sup>th</sup> however, the Jund Ansar Allah's nominal leader, Abdel Latif Mousa alias Abu Noor al-Maqdisi, who had invited all Salafi-Jihadis in Gaza to the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque, delivered a sermon named "Golden advice to the [Hamas leader Ismail] Haniyeh government". Mousa did so despite Hamas' explicit calls to Mousa not to deliver it, and Hamas' response to this open challenge illustrates the unease between the movements.

Surrounding the mosque, and demanding that the sermon attendants lay down their arms, Hamas still opted for mediation, and sent in a negotiator. It was only when the latter was shot from inside the mosque that Hamas responded with force, leaving over two dozen people dead, including Mousa. Swiftly, however, Hamas pardoned around half of the ones arrested during the incident, issued compensation to families of the dead and rebuilt buildings damaged in the clashes.<sup>44</sup> Despite Hamas' efforts to appease the Salafi-Jihadis before and after the incident, a line had been crossed by both a Salafi-Jihadi group and Hamas, and as we will see, the memory of the Ibn Taymiyyah incident is still vivid in Salafi-Jihadi statements.

This incident was an exception to normal Hamas and Salafi-Jihadi behaviour. Indeed, the combination of crackdowns at the time, as well as recurring attacks on UNRWA facilities followed up by only timid response by Hamas forces, revealed, according to one observer, "a certain mutual empathy between the radicals and the police".<sup>45</sup>

### Current developments

At the time of writing, a number of developments are relevant for their impact on the topic studied here:

- In the Sinai, the Egyptian authorities are continuing and escalating<sup>46</sup> their military operations against "armed groups" in the Peninsula's northern areas, a "hotbed"<sup>47</sup> of Islam-inspired militant activity since 2011. This has had the effect of estranging the

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<sup>43</sup> Example of Hamas efforts of negotiations, see for instance the 2011 kidnapping of Vittorio Arrigoni: Brenner, "Jihadism and the Killing of an Italian Activist in Gaza."

<sup>44</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Brenner, "The Deradicalization of Islamists by Islamists," 24.

<sup>46</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Egypt's Military Operation Displaces Residents in Sinai Peninsula"

<sup>47</sup> Israel Defense Forces, "A Raging Hotbed of Terror on the Sinai Border."

local Sinai population from Egyptian authorities, while providing targets for local Salafi-Jihadi groups.

- The US government's decision to name Jerusalem the legitimate capital of Israel in December 2017, prompting a number of reactions. Several Salafi-Jihadi groups vowed to respond "with terrorism".<sup>48</sup> This move by the US government may have served to strengthen the Jihadi narrative that negotiations are futile, and that the Hamas government is impotent with regards to liberating the Palestinian territories.

- With the approaching aftermath of the Islamic State's territorial control, as the IS group has lost dominance over most of the territories in the Syria/Iraq theatre, some new concerns have risen. Among the reasons for concern is the persistence of IS-linked groups outside this theatre, as well as reports of IS members defecting to local Al-Qaida or Taliban groups<sup>49</sup>, which could mean an influx of veteran fighters to areas such as the Sinai Peninsula.

- A new "revised" Hamas charter was published in May 2017. It contained a de facto acceptance of a two state solution while removing a number of statements from the 1980s' charter, which has served as a source of condemnation for Hamas' enemies.<sup>50</sup> The revised charter has potentially strengthened Jihadists' arguments that Hamas no longer is the Islamic alternative in the resistance against Israel, and the new charter is featured in a recent Islamic State, Sinai Province publication as such.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.2 What is Salafi-Jihadism?

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<sup>48</sup> See for instance, SITE Intelligence Group, "Pro-IS Media Group Responds to Jerusalem Announcement, Declares 'Terrorism Is the Solution' December, 7, 2017."

<sup>49</sup> Burke, "Al-Qaida Moves in to Recruit from Islamic State and Its Affiliates."

<sup>50</sup> The new charter has been criticized in the pro-Israeli media, as well as dismissed by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who responded with a video of him throwing a copy of the charter in a paper bin, See Israel, "Revised Hamas Charter Does Not Recognize Israel's Right to Exist, Not Even a Little."; IsraeliPM, *Ever Wonder What Fake News Is?*

<sup>51</sup> The Islamic State, Wilayat Sina', *Millat Ibrahim*. Access through: Zelin, "New Video Message from The Islamic State."

Salafi-Jihadism is one of three main currents of *Salafism*; a norm or tendency within Sunni Islam.<sup>52</sup> In order to understand what Salafi-Jihadism is, we need first to define “Salafism”. The term “Salafism”, stems from the Islamic concept of *as-Salaf aṣ-Ṣāliḥ*, the pious/good/righteous predecessors, who were the three first generations of the followers of the prophet Muhammed. Salafists strive in different ways to live their life according to the example set by these predecessors, at least nominally. As such, Salafism is not one of the Sunni schools, but rather a form of creed, and may be described more abstractly as a school of thought. The term is a contested one<sup>53</sup>, but the following definition is used to define main aspects of the people described in this study, and I believe my definition to be relatively uncontroversial.

Salafi thought can be defined as *literalist regressionists*<sup>54</sup>, meaning that there is a focus on a literal interpretation of religious texts, and that progress is to be obtained by “regressing” towards the *Salaf aṣ-Ṣāliḥ*. Innovation (*bidʿa*) is thus seen as distorting the pure message delivered by God<sup>55</sup>, and Salafism is as such non-pluralist.<sup>56</sup> From this way of thought, which has its more modern roots in the writings of a number of Muslim thinkers, three main trends of practice emerge, defined by Quintan Wiktorowicz as the “quietist” Salafi, the “politico” Salafi, and the “Jihadi” Salafi<sup>57</sup>, the latter a minority within Salafist thought, and the focus of this study.

While Jihad (“struggle”/“strive”) is a common concept within Islam and may, as the translation implies, mean a number of different things, the “Jihadists” focus on the aspect which is armed struggle, or “holy war”. As Wiktorowicz sees it, the three main branches of Salafism, all “share a common creed but offer different explanations of the contemporary world and its’ concomitant problems and thus propose different solutions. The splits are about contextual analysis, not belief.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of this tripartite distinction, see Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement.”

<sup>53</sup> Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries?”, 245.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the concept “literalist regressionist”, see online lecture by Middle East Institute - NUS, *From Al-Qaeda to Islamic State: Understanding Salafi-Jihadism*. 02:50 onwards.

<sup>55</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” 210-211.

<sup>56</sup> Wiktorowicz, 207.

<sup>57</sup> Wiktorowicz, as cited in Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries?”, 257.

<sup>58</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement.”

Wiktorowicz' definition is useful, if incomplete. Thomas Hegghammer, for instance, warns against only employing a *theological* categorization in defining Salafi-Jihadism, as it will not inform the analyst on a Salafi individual's or group's political orientation or priorities. He therefore suggests a definition based upon rationale/preference, whether Ummah-oriented, nation oriented, state-oriented etc.<sup>59 60</sup> Meanwhile, Hegghammer underscores a number of paradoxes we may encounter when employing the term, even with a rationale/preference-based approach.<sup>61</sup> As such, we may safely say that the term is contested, and difficult to employ precisely. Yet, for the sake of utility, I have chosen to use the term Salafi-Jihadi for a number of reasons: it is a term that has become established within the study of violent Islam-inspired groups and at the same time a term sometimes used by these groups to describe themselves. Furthermore, the combination of the concepts *Salafi* and *Jihadi* demonstrates that what we are describing is both specifically a Sunni phenomenon, and of the sort that prefers violence as a means to reach its goals.

As a comparison, to use the term "Islamist" on both Hizbullah, the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaida might be technically correct if we define "Islamism" as seeking to change society in a certain direction based on Islam, but it does not inform us of whether the groups are sectarian, or whether they employ violence. For this reason, I list here a series of features, which characterize the groups and individuals treated in this study. In and of themselves, these features do not suffice to deem someone a Salafi-Jihadi, but clustered they form an ideal type that this author views as distinctly Salafi-Jihadi. Again, this is not a perfect definition, nor does it safeguard from being criticized for leaving out some important feature, but I believe imperfect clarity is better than vagueness at this point:

First of the defining features is a notion of *Sunni supremacy* felt in varying intensity by a Salafi-Jihadi individual or group. This *may* be demonstrated with employment of so-called *takfiri* language, that is, declaring another Muslim (or group thereof) to be only nominally Muslim, literally declaring them to be infidels, or *kuffār* (sing. *kāfir*). This is employed in varying intensity, and is used to qualify enemies, by denying them status of being Muslims, as well as distinguishing the Salafi-Jihadis themselves from others through disassociation.

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<sup>59</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries?", 255-257.

<sup>60</sup> Ummah is an Islamic concept of the "Muslim nation", or community, roughly equivalent to concepts like "Christendom".

<sup>61</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries?", 251-257.

The concept of takfīr is not unheard of among non-Jihadis, but it is generally treated with great caution, as it is considered an extreme measure, only to be employed in certain, specific circumstances, and not to be used lightly.<sup>62</sup> Despite the employment of takfīr language being an important feature in Salafi-Jihadism, there is great disagreement among the actors, and some (like the prominent Abdullah Azzam<sup>63</sup>) do not use it at all in their writings. Nevertheless, this concept is popular as an invective against the Jihadis by their detractors, and one frequently encounters references to Salafi-Jihadi individuals and groups of the more uncompromising kind as “*takfirī*”.<sup>64</sup>

As mentioned, there is a preference within Salafi-Jihadism for a *violence*-based definition of Jihad, and a concept known as “*al-wala’ wal- bara’*”, meaning being loyal to Muslims, and disavowing of non-Muslims.<sup>65</sup> This latter concept may dovetail nicely with a Salafi-Jihadi actor’s employment of takfīr, in that they may then qualify to whom they are obliged to be loyal.<sup>66</sup>

The term *tawhīd*, meaning monotheism, or indivisible oneness of God, is in itself not a typical Salafi feature, as Islam is per definition a monotheist religion. However, *tawhīd* is employed by Salafists to mean an absolute submission to God over all other things, thereby allowing condemnation of the worship of shrines and saint, which is deemed idolatrous (*ṭāghūt*) or even polytheistic (*Shirk*). Lastly, the concept of *ḥākimiyya*, or sovereignty (of God), is the recognition of the “sole jurisdiction of divine revelation in legislation and political authority”.<sup>67</sup> In our context, this might mean deeming any state authority that is not a purely Islamic one as illegitimate.

### 3.3 Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza

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<sup>62</sup> Hegghammer. “Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries?”, 246.

<sup>63</sup> Drennan, “Constructing Takfir: From ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam to Djamel Zitouni.”

<sup>64</sup> See for instance interviews conducted in Sabry, *Sinai*. (2015).

<sup>65</sup> Mneimneh, “Convergence? The Homogenization of Islamist Doctrines in Gaza,” 14.

<sup>66</sup> Middle East Institute - NUS, *From Al-Qaeda to Islamic State: Understanding Salafi-Jihadism*.15:15 onwards.

<sup>67</sup> Mneimneh, “Convergence? The Homogenization of Islamist Doctrines in Gaza,” 17; Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 18.

Salafism presumably arrived in the Palestinian territories as a result of returning Palestinians who had studied abroad in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in Saudi Arabia.<sup>68</sup> Salafi-Jihadism however, is a rather new phenomenon, which some ascribe to only having been present since the early to mid-2000s or so and presumably grew from then on, even if the popularity of specific ideologies such as this one is hard to quantify. Allegedly, this coincides with the first reports of similar sentiments towards Jihadism in the Sinai as well.<sup>69</sup>

Palestine as a geographical entity holds a special place in Jihadist ideology. Not only does it serve as constant evidence and reminder of non-Muslim suppression of a Muslim population, but it is also the home of the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest place in Islam after Mecca and Medina. As such, Palestine or Jerusalem specifically is often referred to as “Bayt al-Maqdis”, meaning the “home of the holy [mosque]”. The combination of these two observations; that non-Muslims (Zionist and/or “Crusaders”) are occupying this holy site is a particularly powerful narrative for many Jihadists.<sup>70</sup> For this reason Palestine and the Palestinian people is frequently referred to in Salafi-Jihadi discourse and propaganda, (it is also employed by non-Jihadist entities, and indeed by nominally secular ones, like many of the Arab states). All this considered, this attention has not translated into any enormous influx of foreign fighters from or to the Palestinian territories, due to the highly restricted access to the area, and a lack of room to maneuver once present. Palestine has nevertheless fostered important Jihadist ideologues.<sup>71</sup>

### 3.4 Timeline

This segment is meant as a point of reference, listing some of the key events discussed in this study, and illustrates the developments discussed in the following chapters, both inside of Gaza and in the MENA region.

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<sup>68</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*. 68-69; Berti, “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat,” 5.

<sup>69</sup> Herman, “Sisi, the Sinai and Salafis,” footnote 19.

<sup>70</sup> See for instance, Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters,” 83.

<sup>71</sup> Wagemakers and Hegghammer, “The Palestine Effect,” 296-297.

Early 2000s: First occurrence of violent Salafis in Gaza.<sup>72</sup>

2006, January: Hamas wins landslide victory in the legislative election.

2007, May: UNRWA school attacked by alleged “Salafist activists”, one person killed.<sup>73</sup>

2007, June: Hamas takes over control of Gaza, pushes out its main political rival, Fatah, from political power.

2008: Gaza war/Israeli “Operation Cast Lead”. Salafi-Jihadis and Hamas join forces on several occasions.

2008, September: Hamas cracks down on Jaysh al-Islam, a Salafi-Jihadi group in Gaza.

2009, August: Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident: Hamas forces raid Rafah mosque, killing Salafi cleric. At least two dozen of the cleric’s followers and Hamas personnel are killed as well.

2009: Introduction by Hamas of a policy of “Islamization of Palestinian society” by the Ministry of Interior and National Security.<sup>74</sup>

2010: UNRWA summer camp vandalized.

2010-2011: Outbreak of Arab Spring demonstrations.

2011, January: Beginning of the Egyptian uprisings.

2011, February-October: Libyan civil war begins. The Gadhafi regime is toppled.

2011, March: Civil uprisings begin in Syria.

2013, April: “Islamic State of Iraq” group takes the name ISIS, after having expanded into Syria.

2014, January-June: ISIS takes control over major cities in Iraq, like Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul.

2014, June: Pro-ISIS rallies in Gaza, dispersed by Hamas police.<sup>75</sup> ISIS rebrands itself the Islamic State (IS).

2015: January: Pro-IS rally in Gaza, allegedly permitted by Hamas.<sup>76</sup>

2015: Series of attacks by Salafi-Jihadi groups in Gaza targeting Hamas and PIJ.

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<sup>72</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 70.

<sup>73</sup> Hovdenak, “Al-Qaida - a Challenge for Hamas?”, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 97; Sayigh, *We Serve the People*, 4-5.

<sup>75</sup> The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, “Expressions of Support in the Gaza Strip for the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), Which Is Affiliated with the Global Jihad,” 3.

<sup>76</sup> al-Mughrabi, “Gaza Jihadist Supporters Rally against France, Praise Islamic State.”

2017, August: Hamas border guard killed reportedly by IS affiliate, being the first time a suicide attack has targeted Hamas forces in Gaza.<sup>77</sup>

## 4. Analyses, statements and activity before the Arab Spring

In order to discuss how the armed activity of the Gazan Salafi-Jihadis have changed and why, this chapter assesses news sources, analyses, Jihadi statements and other activity in the period before the Arab Spring. It is mirrored in chapter 5, with similar assessments in the period after 2011.

This chapter treats primary and secondary sources connected to the factors mentioned in chapter 2.2; *groups, size, recruitment, enemy hierarchy* (with a subchapter containing a case study) and *target selection*. Initially, I have included a study of the material I have gathered from the Global Terrorism Database, as it informs our study of these five factors. The GTD is a part of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism<sup>78</sup>, and is a reputable database monitoring and documenting terrorism incidents. It includes statistics for the region relevant for our study until the end of 2016, and represents an important source of statistics.

### 4.1 The GTD data 2005-2010

For this segment I have extracted information from GTD's archive, listing terrorist incidents in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. For this chapter I go through the years 2005-2010, followed by the years 2011-2016 in chapter 5. I have only studied incidents in which the perpetrators have belonged to known Salafi-Jihadi groups, (excluding secular or non-Salafi Islamist groups such as the PFLP, PRC, Hamas or PIJ<sup>79</sup>) and wherein the perpetrators are

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<sup>77</sup> Morris, "Hamas Struck by Suicide Attack in Gaza for the First Time."

<sup>78</sup> A research and education centre at the University of Maryland.

<sup>79</sup> The PFLP, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine is a nominally secular, socialist group, and is as such not considered here. The PRC is a conglomeration of non-Salafi armed groups, and among the strongest factions in Gaza besides Hamas and PIJ. The PIJ is considered an Islamist, nationalist organization, and despite the name of the group is not considered Salafi-Jihadi.

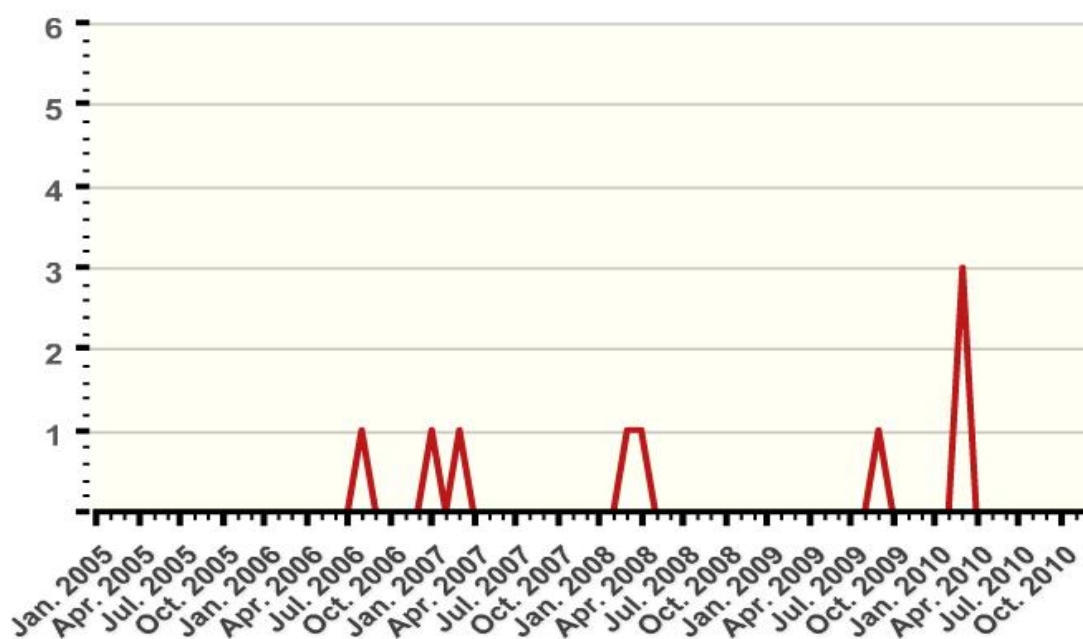


listed as “Palestinian extremists” as opposed to “Unknown”, the latter taking up a majority of the incidents. In the database, I employed the following search criteria: *Years*: between “2005” and “2010”, the qualification “*All incidents regardless of doubt*”, and *Country*: “Israel”, “ West Bank and Gaza Strip”.

Between 2005 and the end of 2010, the GTD has recorded 602 terrorism incidents taking place in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Of these, some have been connected to Salafi-Jihadi groups, either through general suspicion by observers cited in GTD’s sources, or claiming of responsibility for the attacks by the groups themselves.

### **Findings 2005-2010:**

In the 2005-2010, the GTD database lists nine terrorism incidents attributed to groups which can be defined as Salafi-Jihadi, or around 1.5% of the total incidents. By this I have excluded incidents that have been conducted by unknown perpetrators, as well as the incidents that were simply attributed to “Palestinian extremists”, if there was neither any confirmation nor indication available that would describe the perpetrator/s as belonging to any Salafi-Jihadi group or adhering to their ideology in that specific case file. Also excluding “Israeli extremists”, the overwhelming majority of incidents have been ascribed to a Hamas faction, PIJ, PFLP, or other secular/non-Salafi-Jihadi groups.



The GTD data 2005-2010 based on the criteria described above.

Four of the incidents conducted in 2009-2010 are attributed to Ansar al-Sunnah, all directed towards Israel. Two incidents in this period are attributed to Jaysh al-Islam, in 2006 and 2007, both involving kidnappings of foreign journalists. Two attacks in 2008, targeting Israel and foreign dignitaries with rocket attacks are attributed to Jaysh al-Ummah.<sup>80</sup> Attacks against local internet cafés and shops selling CDs and cassettes were in late November 2006 attributed to Suyuf al-Haqq al-Islamiyyah fi Ard al-Ribat, i.e. “Islamic Swords of Justice in the Land of Ribat”.

## 4.2 Groups and size

### Groups

In this period, Salafi-Jihadi groups are generally described as without concrete “organizational or operational” links to any other international networks. This is despite apparent commonality in ideology and method, or close “ideological proximity” to international Jihadist networks<sup>81</sup>; meaning that Al-Qaida serves as the main source of ideological inspiration. The Salafi-Jihadis in Gaza seem to be a loose network, something that is regarded as their weakness, consisting of several small Jihadi groups with a fluid nature, and poor organization, posing little military threat to the larger factions in Gaza.<sup>82</sup>

The GTD data informs us that the groups **Ansar al-Sunnah**, **Jaysh al-Islam**, **Jaysh al-Ummah** and **Islamic Swords of Justice** are active in this period. In addition, an oft cited report from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) from 2010 also names these four (While adding a possible alias to Ansar al-Sunnah: *Jaljalat*, meaning “rolling thunder”), but adds **Jund Ansar Allah**, which we know from the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident, and which GTD does not recognize being the perpetrator of any terrorist incident in this period. Jund Ansar Allah is, however, evidently an active Salafi-Jihadi group, and according to the CTC report, holding about 500 members (before the Rafah mosque incident), and seeking recruits.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Global Terrorism Database, “Incident Summary for GTDID: 200804040023.”

<sup>81</sup> Berti, “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat,” 5.

<sup>82</sup> See for instance, Berti, “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza”.; International Crisis Group, “Radical Islam in Gaza.”

<sup>83</sup> Berti, “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat,” 8.

Jaysh al-Islam is one of the more well-known groups; notorious for its role in the kidnapping of foreigners, among these, Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and BBC reporter Alan Johnston in 2006 and 2007. The former operation was a joint activity with Hamas forces. The Johnston kidnapping was resolved after pressure by Hamas on Jaysh al-Islam to release him. The eventual release took place in July, shortly after Hamas' takeover of power in Gaza, and Jaysh al-Islam allegedly ended its cooperation with Hamas at this time. Jaysh al-Islam reportedly grew out of a Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) milieu, and has since been connected specifically to one of Gaza's clans, the Dughmush.<sup>84 85</sup>

In the spring of 2010, Maan news agency published an interview with alleged Jund Ansar Allah leader Abu Al-Hareth, who claimed that 70% of the Salafi scene in Gaza belonged to the *Jaljalat*, which, according to him was a conglomerate of four groups (and not a synonym for Ansar al-Sunnah), Jund Ansar Allah, Jaysh al-Islam, **Jund Allah** and **al-Tawhid wal-Jihad**.<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, Abu Al-Hareth does not mention Ansar al-Sunnah, as does CTC, even though the publishing of these two reports happened very close in time.

Björn Brenner's analysis lists main groups in this period to be Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Ummah, Jund Ansar Allah, Ansar al-Sunnah and adds al-Tawhid wal-Jihad.<sup>87</sup> This set of groups was also viewed as the five "major groups" by a US intelligence agency in 2011.<sup>88</sup>

Several of the assessments seem to be based more on the groups' media prominence, rather than the group's numerical size, or military capability. Swords of Justice for instance (called "Sayf al-Haqq"), according to one analyst, was a group responsible for many of the over 40 attacks against local Gazan internet cafes and shops selling videos, in an apparent campaign in late 2007.<sup>89</sup> The name of this group is thus rightly among the top list with some observers, however it is completely absent in others'. Likewise, some analyses mention names of

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<sup>84</sup> Cohen, Levitt, and Wasser, "Deterred but Determined: Salafi-Jihadi Groups in the Palestinian Arena," 16.

<sup>85</sup> Stockmarr and Dansk institut for internationale studier, *Gaza's New Islamists*, 34.

<sup>86</sup> Qannan, "Exclusive." "New Gaza Salafist Faction Numbers 11,000."

<sup>87</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 74.

<sup>88</sup> Wikileaks- The Global Intelligence Files, "GAZA STRIP/-Palestinian Reconciliation Helps Keep Away Extremism."

<sup>89</sup> Hovdenak, "Al-Qaida - a Challenge for Hamas?", 24-25.

groups that are almost never mentioned anywhere else, and there are reports of armed activity wherein the assumed culprits are rarely if ever mentioned in any analyses.<sup>90</sup>

As such there is only partial consensus regarding who the main Salafi-Jihadi groups are, and while some groups are more or less always included, others may be mentioned very rarely in academic and news reporting.

## Size

Discerning reliable numbers on the Salafi-Jihadi movement is challenging. While expert analyses' and Salafi-Jihadis' own numbers may differ, Hamas has occasionally (when not simply denying the existence of these groups) downplayed the numbers compared to those mentioned hitherto: When interviewed on this topic in 2009, Abu Hani, a spokesperson for the Hamas police, stated the numbers of Salafi-Jihadi fighters to be between 400 and 500. The same article that quoted Abu Hani also cited Mkhaimar Abusada, professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar university, who put the numbers ten times higher. The Gazan Salafi-Jihadi movement also included "defectors from Hamas"<sup>91</sup> according to Abusada, a feature to be explored further below.

One report from 2010 deems the size of the movement as a whole to be around 4,000-5,000 members, however, with alleged "followers" up to 50,000.<sup>92</sup> The same author cited a conservative estimate to be around 2,500-3,000 Salafi-Jihadis in an article in 2011, referring to alleged leaked Fatah intelligence from prior to 2010.<sup>93</sup> Other analyses based on interviews in Gaza assessed the number to be closer to 1,000-1,500 at that time, even when recognizing the possible validity of the "2,500-3,000" estimate.<sup>94</sup> In the interview with the supposed Jund Ansar Allah leader Abu Al-Hareth in 2010, the latter boasted that the ranks of the "Salafists" in Gaza numbered 11,000 people. While not defining them as other than "Salafis", we may

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<sup>90</sup> For an example of this, The Jihad Brigades in the Land of Al-Ribat, while claiming attacks, have rarely been mentioned by analysts, and is not a part of GTD statistics in this time period. SITE Institute, "Jihad Brigades in the Land of Al-Ribat (Palestine) Claims Responsibility for Attacks on Jewish Settlements."

<sup>91</sup> Williams, "Salafism: A New Threat to Hamas."

<sup>92</sup> Berti, "Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat," 6.

<sup>93</sup> Berti, "Hamas' Internal Challenge: The Political and Ideological Impact of Violent Salafist Groups in Gaza.", 75; Sayigh, "Hamas Rule in Gaza: Three Years On," 4.

<sup>94</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 76, 213 (Bibliography Reference 50).

still assume that he included the Jihadi variety in this number, as he described the majority of them to belong to known Salafi-jihadi groups.<sup>95</sup>

Likewise, individual statements from alleged leading figures of known Salafi-Jihadi groups occasionally describe their numbers to be far greater than what has been possible to discern empirically. For instance, in an interview conducted in 2008, Jaysh al-Ummah's Abu Hafs al-Maqdisi claimed to have "thousands" of fighters in their ranks, numbers that are dismissed by Israeli authorities.<sup>96</sup>

### 4.3 Recruitment

While there is no such thing as public member lists in the Gazan Salafi-Jihadi movements, some sources can give us indications on the overall recruitment base of such groups.

The analyses that comment on the human composition of the Salafi-Jihadi groups describe them consistently as a largely local phenomenon, meaning that they recruit local people and are working within their own communities. The overwhelming majority of sources considered for this dissertation view the amount of foreign fighters operating inside Gaza to be very low, usually considered up to a few dozen people.<sup>97</sup>

The typical Salafi-Jihadis in Gaza are young, low-ranking former or current members of established non-Salafi factions, who –according to Jaysh al-Ummah's Abu Hafs– were "disillusioned"<sup>98</sup>, apparently by the conduct of their mother organizations. These non-Salafi factions are primarily Hamas and Islamic Jihad (PIJ) but also the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) and Fatah.<sup>99</sup> The disillusionment or simply competition with Hamas in the case of former Fatah members makes one scholar describe the situation thus: "[...] many of the pro-Jihadi groups in Gaza are essentially more anti-Hamas than ideologically pro-al-Qa'ida."<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Salafi-Jihadism seemingly has a special appeal among the Qassam

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<sup>95</sup> Qannan, "Exclusive."

<sup>96</sup> Cohen, Levitt, and Wasser, "Deterred but Determined: Salafi-Jihadi Groups in the Palestinian Arena," 13-14.

<sup>97</sup> See for instance, Maan News Agency, "Hamas Denies Report of 'foreign Jihadists' in Gaza."; Abusada, "Hamas Takes on the Radicals by Mkhaimar Abusada." Project Syndicate; International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Gaza," 18.

<sup>98</sup> al-Mughrabi, "FEATURE-Qaeda Groups Active in Gaza after Year under Hamas."

<sup>99</sup> See for instance Levitt, "Hamas's Ideological Crisis.", 90; International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Gaza," 21.

<sup>100</sup> Paz, "Jihadists and Nationalism Islamists: Al-Qa'ida and Hamas," 212.

Brigades; and Salafists had allegedly “completely taken over” the organization at one point, according to a local observer.<sup>101 102</sup>

Indeed, Björn Brenner also suggests that the Salafi-Jihadi groups consisted of about 50 percent Hamas members by 2010.<sup>103</sup> One observer, quoting a presumed founder of Jund Ansar Allah in 2011, claimed up to 70% to be Qassam Brigades’ members.<sup>104</sup> These statistics are hard to verify, and in the case of the observer claiming that the Qassam Brigades had been completely taken over by Salafist, we have to consider potential bias, as the observer himself was a part of “an internal power struggle” within the Brigades, according to the report.<sup>105</sup> However, we may discern that these observations at least indicate that a relatively high percentage of Gaza’s Salafi-Jihadis are connected to other non-Salafi groups, Hamas and the Qassam Brigades in particular.

#### 4.4 Enemy hierarchy

I will argue, that despite a relatively clear enemy hierarchy, there is little consensus among Salafi-Jihadis on where to place non-Salafi factions, especially Hamas.

The Salafi-Jihadi movement has historically been concerned with a number of enemies. In general, the “far enemy”, i.e. the western powers, together with the “near enemy” (Arab regimes seen as corrupt) has been a two-pronged part of an enemy hierarchy. Based on this, Salafi-Jihadi groups can be categorized based on which enemies they consider most important. In a local context, such as Gaza, the enemy hierarchy for Salafi-Jihadis becomes more complex. In this context, the Israeli state, or Jews in general fall into a “near enemy” category, even if linked to the far enemy through Israel’s connections with the US, a phenomenon called the “Crusader-Zionist”- alliance by the Salafi-Jihadis.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>101</sup> International Crisis Group, “Radical Islam in Gaza,” 5.

<sup>102</sup> Spyer, “Analysis: Al-Qaida-Style Extremism Gains Real Power within Hamas.”

<sup>103</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 76.

<sup>104</sup> Maggs, “The Growth of Salafi-Jihadism in Gaza and Consequences for the Peace Process.”

<sup>105</sup> Spyer, “Analysis: Al-Qaida-Style Extremism Gains Real Power within Hamas.”

<sup>106</sup> Hegghammer, “AL-QAIDA STATEMENTS 2003-2004 - A Compilation of Translated Texts by Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman Al-Zawahiri,” 19.

local Shiites or other religious groups, such as Christians are another enemy group; and the non-Salafi factions, such as PIJ, PRC and Hamas is yet another.<sup>107</sup>

### No clear case?

Judging from Salafi-Jihadi groups' and individuals' own statements, the enemy hierarchy varies slightly: While there is a general consistency in the vilification of the West and Israel, Christians and Shiites is not always mentioned, yet remains generally unpopular. The placement of the non-Salafi factions is the one segment where there doesn't seem to be consensus.

Why is there no consensus on the view of the non-Salafi factions? On the one hand some Salafi-Jihadi spokespersons refer to the corrupt or infidel elements within Hamas, stating that it is not the organization as a whole they have a problem with, but its corrupt leadership.<sup>108</sup> This is illustrated by Jund Ansar Allah's Mousa who declined to condemn Hamas as a whole: "As for the faithful, the pure and the first among the Hamas movement, Allah is pleased with them. As for the latter ones, they have lost hope and are confused".<sup>109</sup> While this might seem like an honest approach to the issue (not wanting to denounce a large group as "apostates"), there might be more pragmatic reasons that lie behind this. On several occasions, when criticizing Hamas' actions, the Salafi-Jihadis urge the "[real] Muslims" in the Qassam Brigades or Hamas ranks to join their "Mujahideen brothers", rather than remaining under corrupt rule. As such, we may see it both as a display of integrity and as recruitment efforts.

Another element can be discerned on a more personal level. Even if we distinguish between the Salafi-Jihadi groups, Hamas and the other non-Salafi factions, what is apparent from the analysis of the groups' profile (in the previous sub chapter), is that the individual members may know each other personally across groups, as founders of Salafi-Jihadi groups have been veterans in non-Salafi factions.<sup>110</sup> The typical Salafi-Jihadi member is a former or current

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<sup>107</sup> For an example of anti-Shi'a sentiments, see Hovdenak, "Al-Qaida - a Challenge for Hamas?", 30-31.

<sup>108</sup> Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 75.

<sup>109</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, "ALM Sermon Video Rafah," 3.

<sup>110</sup> One example is the former leader of Ansar al Sunna, Mahmud Talib, a former Qassam Brigades leader, see Berti, "Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat," 8.

member of a non-Salafi faction, and the language describing Hamas, when compared to the rhetoric in describing for example “the Jews” or Shiites, is usually much more careful.

Some, however, have declared that they intend to overthrow the Hamas government, and establish a political system based on their interpretation of true Islamic rule. Besides the notable Jund Ansar Allah declaration of such intentions, an elusive group known as Kata’ib al-Tawhid (Monotheism’ brigade), has claimed as their goal the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Gaza.<sup>111</sup> They are not alone in their dismissal of Hamas’ conduct: the Da’wat al-Haqq media outlet compared Hamas in September-October 2009 to “kharijites”<sup>112</sup>, and decried how the Qassam Brigades had gone “from Mujahideen to criminal killers”, and that Hamas effectively “declared war” on the Salafi-Jihadis.<sup>113</sup>

#### 4.4.1 Case: Abu Omar Al-Khaldi, 2009

In order to illustrate the Salafi-Jihadi views on their enemy hierarchy, the following is an example of the ambivalence felt by one Salafi leader from Gaza: In late 2009, a Salafist “Shaykh”, Abu Omar Al-Khaldi, was interviewed by the Jihadist online forum “Al-Tahaddi” about Al-Khaldi’s recent release from prison, and asked about his views on Hamas. When asked specifically on what he wanted to do in response to the recent Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident, Al-Khaldi responded:

We will face Hamas by refuting its suspicions in front of the public. We will respond to Hamas by recruiting more [supporters]. We will respond to Hamas by empowering our structure [...]. We will respond to Hamas by intensifying our attacks against the Jews.<sup>114</sup>

In stating that “they” wanted to respond to the Hamas crackdowns in such a way indicates a lack of will to fight Hamas directly, even if challenging them in other ways, presumably leading to Al-Khaldi’s arrest in the first place. When asked directly if he would let the incident go unpunished, the Shaykh became very elusive. Al-Khaldi does say that he supports self-defense, even if quickly delving into general allegories:

This does not mean that we do not defend ourselves or that we deliver ourselves. No, brother. Self-defense is a Shariah order and a natural right. Not even animals approve of

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<sup>111</sup> Berti. “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza,” 9.

<sup>112</sup> While referring to an early Islamic sect, today this term is usually meant to describe someone as deviant.

<sup>113</sup> “Kata’ibu l-qassāmi min mujahidīn ‘ilā qatala mujrimīn”, (“Qassam Brigades, from mujahideen to criminal killers”); “ḥamās ta’alīnu l-ḥarba ‘alā “as-salafīyyati l-jihādiyya”, (“Hamas declares war on the “Salafi-Jihadi”). The Da’wat al-Haqq foundation for study and research, “Da’wat Al-Haqq 1.St Ed. Shawwal 1430,” front page. [Arabic]

<sup>114</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, “Al-Tahaddi Forum Interviews Former Prisoner of Hamas,” 4.



humiliation. The bull rebels if his spouse cow is violated. That is why it is called the bull.<sup>115</sup>  
Infidel countries defend themselves, their dignity and opinions, and call that revolution.<sup>116</sup>

Al-Khaldi spoke in general terms and allegory for a full paragraph, the essential message seemed to be that he was not responsible for the whole Salafi-Jihadi movement (even after claiming that “we will respond” so and so), and urged the readers to “Review the life of the Prophet”.<sup>117</sup>

### Early cautions against Hamas

During the Ibn Taymiyyah Incident, Abdel Latif Mousa’s sermon was not shy of warnings against Hamas. If attacks, theft or killings by Hamas were to continue, Mousa stated that Jund Ansar Allah had to retaliate. Yet, these threats of future consequences were not necessarily incitements to violence, yet fell more in line with Al-Khaldi’s statements of the right to defend oneself.

Indeed, the Haniyeh government was accused of exercising a secular system, and stealing from and arresting members of the Salafi-Jihadi movement. But the warnings that followed this were conditional, seemingly reluctant to push the limits too far. Even a group such as Jund Ansar Allah, revered by most Jihadist hardliners after the incident, was hesitant to condemn the organization. Rather, they urged Hamas to change their ways towards the “real Shariah”. In that way, Mousa claimed that he and his followers would be “ready to work as servants to this government that applies the Shariah of Allah, even if you whipped our backs.”<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore, only a couple of months before the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident, high profile Jihadist preacher Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi made similar statements. On his webpage, he harshly criticized Hamas for its crackdown against Jaysh al-Islam, for selling out Muslims, praising Iran, “bringing joy to the Jews” and so on. Despite these accusations, al-Maqdisi did not liken Hamas to the groups that are legitimate targets in the Salafi-Jihadi

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<sup>115</sup> The Arabic word for bull, ثور, shares the same root [ ر و ث ] as the Arabic words for “revolt”, “to rebel”, etc. See Wehr and Milton J., *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 109.

<sup>116</sup> SITE Intelligence Group. “Al-Tahaddi Forum Interviews Former Prisoner of Hamas,” 4.

<sup>117</sup> SITE Intelligence Group. “Al-Tahaddi Forum Interviews Former Prisoner of Hamas,” Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, “ALM Sermon Video Rafah,” 3.

enemy hierarchy (like the Shi'a, or "the Jews"). Rather, he said of Hamas: "We won't stand in the way of those who want to fight for these things [democracy and nationalism], but we won't support them and we don't want others to follow them."<sup>119</sup>

### **Case: al-Tawhid wal-Jihad: no patience with "secular" Hamas**

While Jund Ansar Allah and others were hesitant to condemn Hamas as a whole, or employing takfiri language against them, not all groups were as forgiving: The Tawhid wal-Jihad group is a group which announced its formation immediately after the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident in 2009. In its founding document it complained about the inability of other Salafi-jihadi groups to focus on monotheism (tawhid) *and* jihad at the same time, claiming this way as the only way. Simultaneously this group condemned all secular political concepts and institutions – democracy and nationalism among these– and branded them "contemporary religions". In the second statement the group condemned the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque raid, comparing the action of Hamas to those of Christians and other enemies. Hamas is accused of being only nominally Muslims, attacking the real Muslims: "The time has come when Islam is fought by a group who falsely and fraudulently claims to belong to Islam [Hamas]; a group who trades with the blood of martyrs and the property of the Ummah [...]"<sup>120</sup>

While a clear example of takfiri language employed against Hamas, the latter is not placed together with Christians and Jews in the enemy hierarchy. The indication of this is that despite its harsh criticism, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in its statements argued for a different approach in dealing with Hamas than other antagonists:

We declare that we will continue to raise the flag of tawhid and jihad, jihad with arrows and tongue. We will fight with arrows the Jews and those who follow them. We will fight the hypocrites with the tongue, proof, and evidence until Allah rules between us [...]"<sup>121</sup>

Rather than arguing for physical attacks against the perpetrators of the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident, the reaction is two-pronged: While al-Tawhid wal-Jihad expresses deep regret with the participation of the Qassam Brigades in the Rafah incident, calling them the

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<sup>119</sup> Jihadica, "Maqdisi Blasts Hamas."

<sup>120</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, "Tawhid and Jihad Group in Jerusalem Declares Presence," 5.

<sup>121</sup> SITE Intelligence Group. "Tawhid and Jihad Group in Jerusalem Declares Presence," 7.

“protectors” of Jews and traitors, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad are still offering redemption: “You have to leave those ranks, otherwise, your faith is known.”<sup>122</sup>

This was not a one-off message, but repeated itself a year later in 2010 when the group published a statement condemning Hamas crackdowns against the movement, and complained about the detention and torture of Salafi-Jihadis in prisons. Nevertheless the essence of the statement was that despite these crackdowns, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad would stay on the right path: “no way can you weaken our determination or break our strength”.<sup>123</sup>

What does this tell us about the enemy hierarchy in this period? Drawing on these examples, it seems that there is no absolute consensus in the Salafi-Jihadi movement in Gaza on where to place Hamas, but the general tendency seems to be that Hamas is not among the enemies to be prioritized, as few advocates directly attacking Hamas personnel or institutions.

#### 4.5 Target selection

When it comes to target selection, the Salafi-Jihadi movement has in part followed the course of the other armed Palestinian factions, in targeting Israeli military and civilian targets with rockets, and the occasional kidnapping of foreigners. In the period before the Arab Spring, we also see some incidents inside of Gaza. Notably among these was the operation conducted in 2006 by Suyuf al-Haqq, wherein a dozen locations were attacked with planted bombs, or fired upon by propelled grenades. The targets were local internet cafés and purveyors of CDs and cassettes, and the rationale for these attacks was reportedly that the perpetrators felt that these businesses corrupted the youth and as such served “the Zionist Jews and their masters the Crusaders”.<sup>124</sup> In the spring of 2007, Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz reported that this was a new development starting in October 2006 and that there had been other similar incidents, like the bombing of a pool hall, claimed by Suyuf al-Haqq.<sup>125</sup> There would be occasional attacks of the same nature in the following years, but the assailants

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<sup>122</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, Ibid, 8.

<sup>123</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, “Tawhid and Jihad Group Defiant in Face of Hamas,” 2.

<sup>124</sup> Global Terrorism Database, “Incident Summary for GTDID: 200611300002.”

<sup>125</sup> The Associated Press, “Muslim Vice Squad Suspected in Gaza Internet Cafe, Music Shop Bombings.”

have usually been hard to identify, yet are usually blamed on local “Islamist militants” or “ultra-Islamists”.<sup>126</sup>

Despite these incidents, the majority of attacks in this period were directed towards Israeli or other foreign targets. One analyst cites 24 cases of kidnapping of foreigners between 2004 and 2006 alone, but none of these could be ascribed to any Salafi-Jihadi perpetrators.<sup>127</sup> Likewise, very few attacks were directed towards the other (non-Salafi) factions. There are exceptions though, with a couple of reports describing three bombings of cars belonging to Hamas officials in early 2010.<sup>128</sup> This however was apparently not a trend that caught on. Indeed, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, while heavily criticizing Hamas for its crackdowns on the Salafi-Jihadi movement, he explicitly warned against violent retaliation against them: “time after time I replied with warning against launching a war against Hamas,[...]”<sup>129 130</sup>

The Christian minority in Gaza is generally cited as numbering below 2 000 people.<sup>131</sup> After Hamas came to power, a string of violent incidents hit the small Christian community, like the looting and burning of a school and library inside a local convent, causing several local Christians to attempt to leave Gaza altogether.<sup>132</sup> The owner of a Christian bookstore was abducted and murdered in late 2007, some months after the same bookstore was bombed. Although no one claimed to be behind the attacks at the time, “Islamist militants” were blamed.<sup>133</sup> According to one report, the violence against Gazan Christians has been met by few repercussions by Hamas authorities.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Maan News Agency, “Internet Café in Kahn Younis Targeted by Assailants.”

<sup>127</sup> Hovdenak, “Al-Qaida - a Challenge for Hamas?”, 25.

<sup>128</sup> al-Mughrabi, “ANALYSIS-Hamas and pro-Al-Qaeda Cells Set for More Conflict”; Laub, “Muslim Firebrands Challenge Hamas Rule in Gaza.”

<sup>129</sup> Although not a part of the Gazan Salafi-scene per se, al-Maqdisi is a very influential ideologue from Palestine.

<sup>130</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, “Maqdisi Criticizes Hamas for Events in Rafah,” 2.

<sup>131</sup> Toameh, “Who Will Save the Christians in the Gaza Strip?”; Vickery, “After 2,000 Years, Christians Disappearing from Gaza.”

<sup>132</sup> Wheeler, “Christians Flee Gaza after Convent Attack.”

<sup>133</sup> See Hovdenak, “Al-Qaida - a Challenge for Hamas?”, 24-25; Spyer, “Persecution of Palestinian Christians: Cruelty and Silence in Gaza.”; Silver, “Gaza’s Christian Bookseller Killed.”

<sup>134</sup> Dane and Knocha, “The Role and Influence of Christians in the Palestinian Territories.” 61

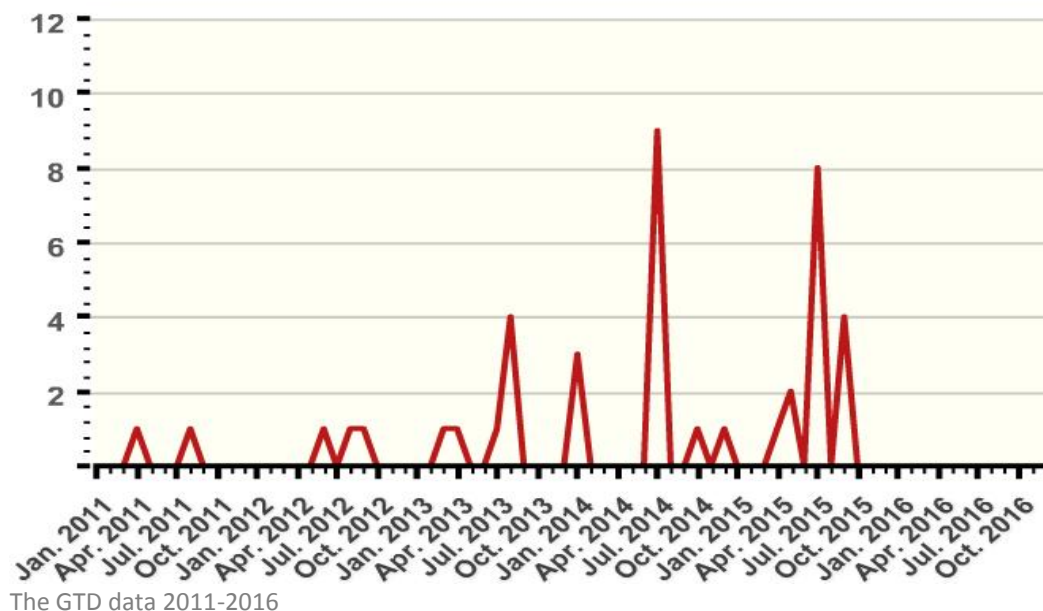
## 5. Analyses, statements and activity after the Arab Spring

### 5.1 The GTD data 2011-2016

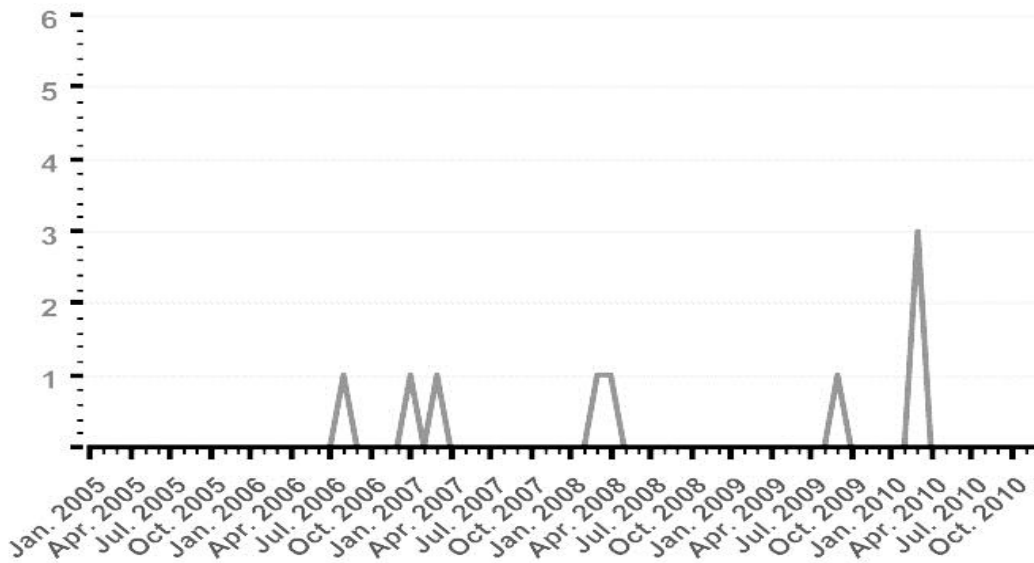
Between early 2011 and the end of 2016, the GTD has recorded 1, 222 terrorism incidents taking place in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Of these, several have been connected to Salafi-Jihadi groups, either through general suspicion or claiming of responsibility for the attacks by the groups themselves.

#### Findings 2011-2016:

In the period between early 2011 to late 2016, the GTD database lists 41 of the recorded terrorism incidents – around 3.3% – as attributed to Salafi-Jihadi groups, both attacks and kidnappings. I have used the same search criteria as in the 2005-2010 section (chapter 4.1), with the years 2011-2016, and again the majority of incidents have been ascribed to a Hamas faction, PIJ, PFLP, or other secular or non-Salafi-Jihadi groups.



The GTD data 2011-2016



For comparison: The GTD data 2005-2010 as shown in chapter 4.1.

The period between 2011 and 2016 saw a general rise in hostilities. Much of this must be seen in context of a series of armed conflicts between Israel and Palestinian factions, in major conflicts including the Israeli operations “Returning Echo”, and “Pillar of Defense” in 2012, and the “2014 Gaza War”. These conflicts saw the rise of armed operations originating in Gaza, and while most are not attributed to Salafi-Jihadi groups, the GTD data does show a significant surge in Salafi-Jihadi armed activities. The percentage of all incidents had more than doubled, and the total numbers of incidents more than quadrupled compared to the previous period. The GTD data also shows a rise in attacks directed towards targets inside Gaza, 13 in all, and one attack targeting Israel, allegedly as a reaction to the trial of a suspected ISIS member in Israel in September 2015.

## 5.2 Groups and size

### Groups

In the period after the Arab Spring, a number of analyses have made efforts to map out the most prominent Salafi-Jihadi groups active in or stemming from Gaza. This notion of prominence is usually based on whether a group has been particularly active, whether it can be observed being so, or simply that it holds certain notoriety for whatever reason. In several of the analyses, some of the more famous groups from the 2000s are mentioned without any reference to their recent activity, indicating inclusion based on their notoriety,

such as Jund Ansar Allah. In addition, it seems that there are a couple of newcomers coming into prominence after the Arab Spring that may be recognized as more potentially influential than the “old”, less active groups.

An analysis published in 2012 by the “Long War Journal” (LWJ), a blog reporting on the War on Terror, listed six groups considered the major players in the Salafi-Jihadi scene in Gaza at the time. While mentioning the **Tawhid wal-Jihad, Army of Islam, Jund Ansar Allah** and **Jaysh al-Ummah**, –groups known from the pre-Arab Spring analyses– two other groups are included; **Masada al-Mujahideen** and **Jaish al-Mu’minun**.<sup>135</sup> The former is a group that has eulogized Osama Bin Laden, claimed rocket attacks, and has taken responsibility for a series of fires taking place in Israel in 2010<sup>136</sup>, 2011 and late 2016. Considering that there is no evidence that these fires were started deliberately<sup>137</sup>, or that any of the rocket attacks could be attributed to them, I assume that the author included this group based on the group’s own statements of their importance.

The Jaish al-Mu’imun is referred to by the LWJ as “Al-Qaida in Palestine”.<sup>138</sup> The group claims to be behind attacks on local targets, such as opening fire on a local YMCA building, and the murder of a Christian bookseller.

The LWJ list is similar to an analysis published by the RAND Corporation from 2017, which regarded Jund Ansar Allah, Jaysh Al-Islam, Jaysh Al-Ummah, and al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (whose alleged leader was arrested by Hamas police in 2011<sup>139</sup>) as the four “principal active groups” at play in Gaza.<sup>140</sup>

The Israel-based think tank “International Institute for Counter-Terrorism” (ICT) considered in a report the key Gaza-linked groups in the Sinai theatre to be (together with Egyptian Takfir wal-Hijra) Jaysh al-Islam, Tawhid wal-Jihad, the **Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem** (MSC), and **Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis** (ABM).<sup>141 142</sup> The latter two groups

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<sup>135</sup> Roggio, “ Hamas Frees Al-Qaeda-Linked Jihadist Leader in Gaza | FDD’s Long War Journal.”

<sup>136</sup> For a translation of the claim of responsibility, see, Flashpoint Partners, “Ma’asada’t Al-Mujahideen in Palestine (Lions of the Mujahideen) Claim Responsibility for Israeli Forest Fires (December 3, 2010).”

<sup>137</sup> Dearden, “Al-Qaeda Affiliate Claims Responsibility for Devastating Israel Fires.”

<sup>138</sup> Roggio, “Israel Kills ‘Global Jihad Affiliated-Terrorists’ in Gaza Airstrikes | FDD’s Long War Journal.”

<sup>139</sup> Issacharoff, “ Hamas Arrests Wanted Global Jihad Militant in Gaza.”

<sup>140</sup> Clarke, “How Salafism’s Rise Threatens Gaza.”

<sup>141</sup> Bongers, “Global Jihad in Sinai: An Extension of the Gaza Strip?”, 19-29.

gained prominence shortly after the Arab Spring and would later become more deeply connected to the Islamic State group than they were at the time of the ICT report's publishing in March 2014.

### The new, Islamic State- inspired groups

Of the newcomers after the Arab Spring, the MSC and **Wilayat Sina'** feature prominently in reports and analyses. Both groups are a result of mergers of groups that have consistently been deemed "al-Qaida affiliates", and they are both considered to be loyal to IS, with the Wilayat Sina' being an official "province" of the Islamic State. According to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in 2015, the latter is "one of the more violent and organized groups to operate within the Sinai", and together with the MSC the only two organized groups representing a terrorist threat from the peninsula.<sup>143</sup>

The MSC is widely recognized to be a merger of several smaller Salafi-Jihadi groups, and most notably al-Tawhid wal-Jihad and Ansar al-Sunnah.<sup>144</sup> The MSC claimed responsibility for rocket attacks against Israel including a June 2012 attack, killing an Israeli civilian.<sup>145</sup>

Back in 2012 again, the LWJ mentioned attacks perpetrated by the MSC, which the author names an al-Qaida affiliated group, in that they paid homage to Al-Qaida and dedicated their activities to al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>146</sup> The MSC however, was not included in the journal's listing of the six major groups a couple of months earlier, indicating that this group may have risen to prominence quite suddenly.

In contrast to Jaish al-Mu'minin and Masada al-Mujahideen, the MSC appears in analyses and media reports in 2014, when the latter pledged allegiance to the IS.<sup>147</sup> This followed a series of previous messages published by the MSC media outlet, the Ibn Taymiyyah Media

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<sup>142</sup> A group in Gaza calling itself Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis was present at least as early as 2009. See Khatib, "Palestinian Territories: Cutting Out the Competition."

<sup>143</sup> Israel Defense Forces, "A Raging Hotbed of Terror on the Sinai Border."

<sup>144</sup> Barnett, "Gaza Jihadist Group Praises Ansar Jerusalem Fighters, Calls for More Attacks | FDD's Long War Journal."

<sup>145</sup> Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda-Linked Group Claims Responsibility for Attack in Israel | FDD's Long War Journal."

<sup>146</sup> Barnett, "Mujahideen Shura Council Is Consolidation of Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Gaza."

<sup>147</sup> Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 80



Center, wherein the outlet expressed support for IS. The group had flown banners and emblems identical to IS' since at least early 2013.<sup>148</sup>

**Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis** (ABM) is another group whose activities have had a profound impact on Israeli as well as Egyptian sense of order and stability. Described as the most efficient and lethal group in the Sinai desert, the group is known to consist of a mixture of Egyptian and Gazan fighters. The group, like MSC, rose after the Egyptian revolution in 2011<sup>149</sup>, and seems to have established connections with al-Tawhid wal-Jihad. In 2015, one estimate considered its numbers to be "at least" 500 fighters.<sup>150</sup> ABM was named by the UN Security Council as one of the groups to have benefitted from the trafficking of Libyan arms after 2011.<sup>151</sup>

In early 2015, media sources reported on the emergence of a group calling itself the **Sheikh Omar Hadid Brigade**, allegedly an offshoot from ABM, and according to one observer, the branch of ABM operating primarily in Gaza.<sup>152</sup> According to the GTD, the Sheikh Omar Hadid Brigade launched four attacks against Israeli territory in September 2015.<sup>153</sup>

The ABM, or at least a part of the group, pledged allegiance to IS in 2014, perhaps as early as in June, when a Twitter account claiming to represent ABM declared allegiance to IS leader Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi and changed the group's name to "the Islamic State".<sup>154</sup> However, another pledge of allegiance was published in November, denying previous pledges, indicating divisions within the group.<sup>155</sup> In any case, the IS and ABM activity has grown significantly in the Egyptian sphere, with reports of over 350 attacks being connected to ABM and/or IS in Egypt since the Arab Spring until 2017, the overwhelming majority of them taking place after the ABM pledge of allegiance.<sup>156</sup>

## Size

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<sup>148</sup> See SITE Intelligence Group, "MSC in Jerusalem Releases Video Biography, Will of Egyptian Fighter."

<sup>149</sup> Rahmani and Tanco, "ISIS's Growing Caliphate."

<sup>150</sup> Awad and Tadros, "Bay'a Remorse?", 1.

<sup>151</sup> Marsh, "Brothers Came Back with Weapons: The Effects of Arms Proliferation from Libya," 86.

<sup>152</sup> Klein, "ISIS Issues Dire Warning to Israel.", World News Daily, February, 6, 2015.

<sup>153</sup> Global Terrorism Database, "GTD Search Results> Sheikh Omar Hadid Brigade."

<sup>154</sup> See Levy and Kochavi, "ISIS: We Are Operating in Gaza - Vocativ"; Mahmoud, "«بيت المقدس» تعلن عن تغيير اسمها إلى «الدولة الإسلامية» Vetogate.", "Bayt al-Maqdis announces that they change their name to "the Islamic State". June 30, 2014. [Arabic]

<sup>155</sup> Kirkpatrick, "Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS."

<sup>156</sup> Gilkes, "'Then Kill the Pagans Wherever You Find Them': The Emerging Trend of Islamic State Networks Targeting Christians in Egypt," 145.

Just like in the period before the Arab Spring, it is difficult to determine with any certainty the size of the Salafi-Jihadi movement after 2011. Accounts differ greatly, but even the highest numbers do not exceed the high numbers estimated before the Arab Spring. Often, news sources simply quote unnamed “analysts”<sup>157</sup>, and even in the academic literature only quite vague estimates are offered. Available numbers differ from between a couple of hundred active fighters to around a thousand inside Gaza. However, with the increased collaboration and contacts between Gazan Jihadists and Egyptian (including Bedouin) fighters in Sinai, these numbers may potentially change significantly. One news report from 2016 cited the number of fighters internally in Gaza to be about 3 000, while stated that the number of Gazan fighters having moved to Sinai was a couple of hundred in recent times.<sup>158</sup> Another report from the following year considered the number of Gazan fighters joining Wilayat Sina’ to be around 130.<sup>159</sup>

In contrast, The Economist cited the strength of PIJ fighters in 2014 to be about 5000 man strong, and Hamas to hold about 20 000 fighters in their ranks.<sup>160</sup>

### 5.3 Recruitment

The majority of reports considered for this study indicate that Gaza has seen little influx of foreign fighters. This is also valid for the period after the Arab uprisings, and the members of Salafi-Jihadi groups are mostly former or current members of the other factions in Gaza. When estimates of foreign elements are offered, they are usually low, like in the previous period, despite some ambiguous reports of higher numbers.<sup>161</sup>

The movement in Gaza is generally described as being loosely connected or fragmented, and is forbidden to use arms internally in Gaza, except if fighting against Israel, which in principle is allowed unless otherwise commanded by the Hamas government.<sup>162</sup> To what degree

<sup>157</sup> See for instance Akram, “Fearing Unrest and Israeli Reprisals, Hamas Takes on Salafi Rivals.”

<sup>158</sup> i24NEWS, “Gaza’s Hardline Radicals Modeling Themselves on Islamic State.”

<sup>159</sup> Salem, “Gaza Jihadists Undermine Egypt-Hamas Cooperation.”

<sup>160</sup> The Economist, “Who’s in Charge? - The Gaza Strip.”

<sup>161</sup> An example of this, is the Egyptian news outlet ElWatan, who in 2016 claimed that 250 ISIS-linked fighters received training by the Qassam Brigades in Gaza, yet did not confirm that the fighters in question were foreigners. Some fighters belonging to ABM, however, allegedly received Palestinian ID cards by Hamas. See Maqlid et al., “مصادر: «غزة» تدرب مسلحين على تنفيذ عمليات بسيناء” [Sources: «Gaza» trained gunmen to carry out operations in Sinai]. [Arabic]

<sup>162</sup> See for instance: Landinfo, “Palestina: Væpnede Grupper På GazaStripen,” 5. [Norwegian]

armed Salafists in Gaza is part of any Al-Qaida network is unclear, but several groups hail AQI's deceased leader al-Zarqawi, and many claim ideological proximity to Al-Qaida without necessarily being members of any official al-Qaida branch, much like the case was in the previous period.

One human rights organization has pointed out that following the Arab Spring and until the toppling of Muhammed Mursi, Gazan Salafi-Jihadis were able to establish tighter connection with Salafists in Egypt, as well as organizing arms smuggling into Gaza.<sup>163</sup> This topic will be discussed further, below.

## 5.4 Enemy hierarchy

Just like in the previous period, it does not seem like all Salafi-Jihadi groups are evolving in the same direction. Most statements are concerned the same type criticism of Hamas and the non-Salafis, but many again are not opposed to the "Muslims" or "Mujahideen" within Hamas itself, only the seemingly corrupt elements.

However, some examples indicate a significant shift in the enemy hierarchy for important segments of the Salafi-Jihadi movement:

### 5.4.1 Case: The Islamic State, Wilayat Sina', 2018

In early 2018 the Wilayat Sina' group demonstrated a shift in their enemy hierarchy. Wilayat Sina', (and before that, the ABM) have allegedly had longstanding cooperation across the border to Gaza, and reports of fighters receiving treatment in Gazan hospitals are not uncommon.<sup>164</sup> The relationship between ABM/ Wilayat Sina' and Hamas has apparently been one of pragmatic convenience, if somewhat turbulent, with stories of conflict related to Hamas' arrest of local Salafis' and the Sinai's Jihadists answering in turn by pausing smuggling activity into Gaza.<sup>165</sup> <sup>166</sup> In early January, Wilayat Sina' published a 22 minutes long

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<sup>163</sup> Landinfo, 8-9.

<sup>164</sup> Times Of Israel, "IDF General."

<sup>165</sup> Gold and Berti, "Hamas, the Islamic State, and the Gaza-Sinai Crucible."

<sup>166</sup> McKernan, "More and More Hamas Fighters Are Defecting to Isis."

video named *Millat Ibrahim* (“The people/denomination/religion of Abraham”). In this video, featuring a fighter identified as Palestinian<sup>167</sup>, Hamas is the main target of Wilayat Sina’s criticism, and is categorized together with the Shi’a, Mahmud Abbas’ PA, Egypt’s president Sisi and Israel. The video opens with a clip of US president Donald Trump, announcing his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital; followed up with Wilayat Sina’ claiming that Palestine has been divided between the oppressor (Benyamin Netanyahu), the tyrant (PA’s Mahmud Abbas) and “the gang” who profits from the jihad (Hamas).<sup>168</sup>

Some of the verbal attacks presented in the video are not uncommon; Hamas is blamed for not putting Islamic law in motion, and for not liberating Palestine. Some other elements in the video message are similar to other portrayals of grievances known from before the Arab Spring. In the video, scenes from the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incidents are shown<sup>169</sup> followed by footage of orthodox Jews at the Temple Mount, a church and Shi’a militants’ banners.<sup>170</sup> However, there are some elements that indicates a shift between this message and messages from before the Arab Spring.

Certainly, criticism against Hamas as apostates are not unheard of, but in this video, the publishers refer to Hamas as infidels (*kuffār*), claiming that their nominal Muslim identity will not save them from *takfīr*, and that spending time with infidels (Hizbullah, Sisi, and king Abdullah of Jordan are shown in stills), makes Hamas even more infidel.<sup>171</sup> Afterwards, as Fatah is also denoted the same title, allegedly working for “the Zionists”, the speaker cites part of a Qur’anic verse: “[...] kill them wherever you find them”.<sup>172</sup> By doing so, the speaker equates Fatah with “the Jews”, and he calls Hamas by the same derogatory titles, equating Hamas with Fatah in the enemy hierarchy.

In contrast with the views expressed in the interview with Shaykh Abu Omar Al-Khaldi from 2009, Wilayat Sina’ in its video message does not shy away from concrete policy recommendations. On the contrary, the group is very specific: “I speak to all believing

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<sup>167</sup> ISIS.liveuamap, “Egypt- Wilayat Sinai Video Focused on Israel, Jerusalem and Palestinians. Led by Abu Kazim Al-Maqdisi (Palestinian), Who Calls Hamas Apostates, Later Executes Izz Ad-Din Al-Qassam Brigades’ Member and Finishes with a Warning to ‘the Jews.’”

<sup>168</sup> The Islamic State, Wilayat Sina’, *Millat Ibrahim*. Access through: Zelin, “New Video Message from The Islamic State.” 01:44. [Arabic] [All translations from Arabic by me. ]

<sup>169</sup> The Islamic State, Wilayat Sina’, *Millat Ibrahim*. 03:17-03:20.

<sup>170</sup> The Islamic State, Wilayat Sina’ 03:25-03:35.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 09:00-10:00.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 11:45.

Palestinians: You will not get away from killing kuffār, [...]”. These announcements were followed up by calls to attack public institutions and police headquarters in Gaza, and simply, “kill them; do not spare them”.<sup>173</sup>

## 5.5 Target selection

As the GTD data indicates, this period saw a general rise in armed activity for Salafi-Jihadi groups, and importantly for this study, also saw a development in target selection. Besides armed groups’ attacks towards Israel<sup>174</sup>, not only did armed activity inside Gaza rise, but a series of episodes differentiate this period from the years before the Arab Spring. In the following, details of some of these incidents are described:

- The spring of 2015 saw a string of attacks directed against Hamas targets. In April, the Hamas internal security headquarters in Sheikh Radwan were bombed by alleged ISIS affiliates, following the arrest of a Salafi imam.<sup>175</sup>
- This was followed by an incident in May of 2015 when Saber Siam, a Hamas “top commander”, was assassinated in a car bombing attack. A subsequent statement denounced Hamas for conducting a war against Islam, claiming more attacks against Hamas to come.<sup>176</sup> This attack followed Hamas crackdowns on local Salafi-Jihadi groups, wherein Hamas arrested high ranking Salafi individuals, and demolished a mosque which allegedly was employed by ABM members.
- May 2015 also saw other property owned by Hamas or Hamas officials attacked.<sup>177</sup> A group calling itself the “Supporters of the Islamic State in Jerusalem” (Jama‘at Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Bayt al-Maqdis) took responsibility for two mortar shells fired at a Qassam Brigades location near Khan Yunis, after issuing a warning of an attack should the government not release Salafi prisoners.<sup>178 179</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 16:13 onwards.

<sup>174</sup> See for instance July; august 2016; Lappin, “ISIS-Affiliated Terror Group Takes Credit for Gaza Rocket Attack”; Khoury, “Hamas Denies Role in Gaza Rocket Attack, Blasting Local ISIS Group.”

<sup>175</sup> Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 81.

<sup>176</sup> Varghese, “Gaza.”

<sup>177</sup> Hadid and Al Waheidi, “ISIS Allies Target Hamas and Energize Gaza Extremists.” June 30, 2015.

<sup>178</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, “Pro-IS Group in Gaza Claims Firing Mortars at Hamas Location After Expiration of Deadline.”

<sup>179</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, “‘Supporters of the Islamic State in Jerusalem’ Threatens Hamas.”

- In July 2015, an attack in Sheikh Radwan took place wherein bombs targeting six to seven cars belonging to Qassam Brigades and PIJ's al-Quds Brigades, were set off.<sup>180</sup> Local Salafi-Jihadi groups were suspected, due to recent activity in that area, and reports emerged of scrawling of IS-logos near the place of the attacks.<sup>181 182</sup>
- In early December 2016, "The New Arab" news agency reported that a Hamas raid on Gazan Salafists had resulted in a grenade being thrown, leaving two men wounded.<sup>183</sup>
- In mid-august 2017 a Hamas border guard was killed in a suicide attack conducted at the Rafah border crossing. The perpetrator was alleged to belong to an IS-affiliated Gazan group. The attack is the first one of its kind<sup>184</sup>, and followed a tightening of Hamas border control along the Gaza-Egypt crossing.
- In October 2017, Hamas' security chief Tawfeeq Abu Naeem survived an assassination attempt wherein a bomb in his car had been detonated.<sup>185</sup> Reuters, in reporting on the incident, contextualized the attack by relating it to the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation efforts conducted at the time, as well as the fact that Hamas recently had detained a "senior operative" from a local Salafi group, as a part of stepping up its security campaign. The report suggests that the perpetrators were local Salafi-Jihadis, as Hamas did not blame anyone for the attack (including Israel), which falls in line with Hamas' occasional denial of the existence of local Salafi-Jihadi groups.
- The Wilayat Sina' video from January 2018 depicts the execution of Hamas "collaborator" Musa Abu Zumat. According to the video, the killer is a Hamas defector, and is seen dressed in a uniform commonly seen on Qassam Brigades' members.<sup>186</sup>

## 6. Discussion

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<sup>180</sup> Reuters, "Explosions Hit Hamas, Islamic Jihad Cars in Gaza."

<sup>181</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Explosions Hit Cars of Hamas Officials in Gaza City."

<sup>182</sup> Times Of Israel, "Two Injured as Series of Car Bombs Rocks Gaza Strip."; Times of Malta Ltd, "Gaza Explosions Target Cars of Hamas Officials."

<sup>183</sup> The New Arab and agencies, "Two Wounded as Hamas Clashes with Gaza Hardliners."

<sup>184</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Hamas Guard Killed in Suicide Bombing in Southern Gaza."

<sup>185</sup> Reuters, "Hamas Says Its Security Chief Wounded in Gaza Car Bombing."

<sup>186</sup> The Islamic State, Wilayat Sina', *Millat Ibrahim*. 19:00 onwards. [Warning: graphics of excessive violence]

The findings as outlaid in the two previous chapters show some overarching trends. While there is continuity in some dimensions, like the overall size and recruitment base of the Salafi-Jihadi movement in Gaza; prominent groups that were considered the most relevant before the Arab Spring have in part been replaced by new, Islamic State inspired groups. Crucially, this includes fusions with local Egyptian extremist elements. With regards to the Salafi-Jihadi rhetoric, there is both change and continuity. It is important to understand the statements condemning Hamas in connection with the violent acts actually performed by the groups behind these statements: For example, the statements criticizing Hamas, and arguing for attacks against Israel can be said to have been followed up with rockets fired against Israel quite regularly. What represent the biggest change is that the criticism against the non-Salafi factions after the Arab Spring has been followed up with actual physical attacks against these, and in a much higher frequency than before.

Thus, to get an understanding of the trajectories of the Gazan Salafi-Jihadi movement, we must view these factors, -Groups, size, recruitment, enemy hierarchy, target selection- as mutually influencing and not separate from each other.

#### Groups and size:

As mentioned, we have seen some continuity between the periods before and after the Arab Spring, in that new groups are formed or splinter, some seem inactive, and some have been consistently active. Of the latter, **Jaysh al-Islam**, **Ansar al-Sunnah** and **Tawhid wal-Jihad** (in the later period as **MSC**), and **Jund Ansar Allah** is frequently regarded as among the main groups. It seems clear from the analyses studied here, that getting a detailed overview over the activities of the individual groups is difficult, as reliable sources are hard to obtain, and facts are deliberately kept undisclosed both by the groups themselves, their rivals and their enemies. The same is true with regards to concrete numbers. There are, however, no strong indications of any significant growth in size of the Salafi-Jihadi movement after the Arab Spring. One indication of this is, however anecdotal, that the video messages published by Gazan groups rarely show any groups of fighters larger than a couple of dozen, in contrast with videos produced by the larger groups in the past, like IS in Syria/Iraq.

Some western analysts have worried about the potential of a unification of the Jihadi scene in Gaza, one arguing that a tighter organization could increase the movement's "operational

strength and effectiveness.<sup>187</sup> Despite some efforts in the years preceding the Arab Spring and calls for unification after, this has not come to fruition. One example is in 2009, when Jaysh al-Ummah complained that another local group, Masada al-Mujahideen, had stolen the name for their media outlet, Jaysh al-Ummah still “renewed” their offer of joining forces, indicating that the idea of unification was precious, at least to Jaysh al-Ummah:

While we disapprove of this flagrant hostility on the name of our media foundation [...] We renew our call to the brothers in Masada al-Mujahideen to the necessity to unite with us in one group and to form a Mujahideen Shura Council<sup>188</sup>. The Army of the Ummah has always taken the initiative to call Salafist Jihadist groups to unite.<sup>189</sup>

Despite these calls by certain individuals and groups as expressed in statements online, one leaked security analysis argued that the lack of unification was a conscious choice, “so as to make it difficult for Hamas to destroy them in one strike, as was largely done to Jund Ansar Allah in the 2009 mosque raid.”<sup>190</sup> While there might be some truth in this, the fact that Salafi-Jihadis have regularly called for unification ever after the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque incident more strongly indicates a will to join forces, but that practical concerns have hindered these efforts.

### Recruitment:

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, there is little indication of any significant change in the recruitment of the Salafi Jihadi groups. In both the period before and after the Arab Spring, the groups seem to consist of almost exclusively local fighters, many of which are defectors or current members of other non-Salafi factions, with very few foreign fighters. Despite the flow of foreign fighters to nearby theaters of war (notably Syria and Iraq) in recent years, those analysts commenting on the issue rarely point to any number over a few dozen in Gaza. Rather, the young, local, disillusioned or disenfranchised lower ranking Fatah, PIJ or Hamas fighter seem to be the typical recruit, and one of the types the Salafi-Jihadis have

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<sup>187</sup> Berti, “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat,” 9. See also Brenner, *Gaza under Hamas*, 75.

<sup>188</sup> A Shura Council is an Islamic concept of a consultative council, a form of legislative body in this context. Masada al Mujahideen is as such *not* referring to the MSC group, even though the latter takes its name from the same Islamic concept.

<sup>189</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, “Army of the Ummah Takes Issue with Palestinian Faction,” 2.

<sup>190</sup> WikiLeaks- The Global Intelligence Files, “[CT] DISCUSSION - Militant Groups In Gaza and Their Challenge to Hamas,” December 2010.



openly tried to enlist. Despite reports on an influx of fighters from Gaza into Sinai<sup>191</sup>, there is little indication that this has altered the recruitments base of fighters in the groups inside Gaza itself.

### Sinai:

On the other hand, the fighters operating in “exile” in Sinai does not seem to work in isolation, on the contrary, groups like the former ABM consist of “Al-Qaida defectors, Jihadis from Gaza and Egyptian radical Islamists who have returned from conflict zones in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan”<sup>192</sup> and local Bedouins<sup>193</sup>. As such, it is possible to argue that the “operational” ties between local Salafi-Jihadi groups and international groups are still missing inside of Gaza. However, the overflow of Gazan fighters to Sinai, teaming up with smuggling contacts as well as the recent arrival of IS presence in the region, shows how operational ties to international groups may be much more concrete in the Sinai.

In addition, this effect may be reinforced by the presence of Gazan Salafist who have previously been expelled from Gaza in the past and pushed into Egypt, and the close “financial and familial” connection between the Sinai population and Gazans in general.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>195</sup> Some Qassam Brigades members even served time in Egyptian prisons, potentially strengthening ties to local insurgents or criminals even further.<sup>196</sup> Additionally, Gazans fighting in Syria under the name **Shaykh Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi Brigade** (taking its name from the nom de guerre of Jund Ansar Allah’s Mousa) has been well documented<sup>197</sup>.

Furthermore, in relation to the peninsula as a safe haven for Jihadists, the ascendance of local Shari’a courts in Sinai replacing former tribal courts<sup>198</sup> is arguably another consoling factor for Salafi-Jihadis decrying the “un-Islamic” ways of the Hamas government. Instead, the Sharia courts of Sinai was described by one local observer as showing little “objection to

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<sup>191</sup> Issacharoff, “Gazans Said Streaming into Sinai to Fight with Islamic State”; Issacharoff, “Elite Hamas Fighters Defecting to Islamic State.”

<sup>192</sup> Moore, “Gaza’s next War Looms as ISIS Vows to Overthrow Hamas in Execution Video.”

<sup>193</sup> Bongers, “Global Jihad in Sinai: An Extension of the Gaza Strip?”, 11-14.

<sup>194</sup> Smuggling activity in Sinai which began in the 1990s was strengthened due to the blockade of and sanctions against Gaza after Hamas’ takeover. See for instance, Bongers, 4-5.

<sup>195</sup> See Herman, “Sisi, the Sinai and Salafis”; Sabry, *Sinai*, 131.

<sup>196</sup> Sabry, *Sinai*, 21.

<sup>197</sup> Al-Tamimi, “Muhajireen Battalions in Syria (Part Three).”

<sup>198</sup> Sabry, *Sinai*, 110-118.

the rising militant and *takfiri* groups [...] <sup>199</sup>”, and the same observer described the ideological difference between judges and the *takfiri* elements being “almost nonexistent”. <sup>200</sup>

While the latter might be an overstatement, we may safely say that a notion of closeness to Gaza rather than to Cairo is enhanced in the Sinai population due to long durations of being neglected or downright oppressed <sup>201</sup>, creating antagonism towards the Egyptian authorities. Another analyst notes these dynamics as especially potent for Jihadist groups with connection to both areas: “ABM’s unique strength was its coalition of operatives sympathetic to al-Qaida, Jihadis with local grievances, and radical Gazan elements still focused to a significant degree on Israel.” <sup>202</sup> The grievances towards Egyptian authorities were exploited very explicitly in August 2014, when ABM published a video showing a series of clips featuring Egyptian police and/or soldiers harassing, beating, torturing or murdering civilians. <sup>203</sup>

### Enemy hierarchy:

Based on the data discussed here, it might seem that the key antagonists for the Salafi-Jihadi movement remain the same. Israel, (or simply “the Jews” or Zionists) has not lost its position as a main enemy for the movement, while some focus more on the “Far Enemy”, local minorities or Shi’a Muslims.

Salafi-Jihadi criticism of Hamas (in addition to criticism towards other major factions) has existed since the emergence of Salafi-Jihadi groups in Gaza, and is as such not a product of developments following the Arab Spring. The points of criticism (as published in Jihadi media outlets and forums) have been relatively consistent, usually focusing on one or more of these elements: Hamas’ participation in democratic elections, any association with Iran or Iran-backed factions, cooperation with Israel or Fatah, implementing and upholding ceasefires, cracking down on Salafi/Salafi-Jihadi activity including imprisonment, and reducing its violent operations (dubbed as being soft on Israel or giving up the armed

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<sup>199</sup> Sabry, 123.

<sup>200</sup> Sabry, Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> With regards to education, development and investments. See Sabry, Preface, vii-viii.

<sup>202</sup> Awad and Tadros, “Bay`a Remorse?”, 3.

<sup>203</sup> Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, *New video message from Jamā’at Anṣār Bayt al-Maqdis*. [Arabic]

struggle). However, while there have been a few incidents in the past where Salafi-Jihadis have called for attacks against Hamas, this tendency has risen quite dramatically with the IS-inspired/affiliated groups. The latest and perhaps most unambiguous example of this is Wilayat Sina's video message from 2018, titled "People of Abraham", wherein Hamas is equated with the Jews and Fatah in the enemy hierarchy.

### **Target selection:**

As we have seen, before the Arab Spring, the Hamas government's crackdowns on Salafi-Jihadis have been met (besides criticism and online complaints) with Salafi-Jihadi attacks against Israel. Despite a handful of operations against local purveyors of "vice", and some alleged plots against Hamas targets, the focus has largely been on Israel. However, I believe it is in target selection that we see the most dramatic development take place.

In the period after the Arab Spring, we see increased and direct physical attacks against Hamas and PIJ targets, both low ranking personnel (such as a Rafah suicide bomb, and Wilayat Sina's execution), headquarters (including Hamas' security headquarters) and public figures (including Hamas' security chief). The rationale for these attacks (as presented in the statements) is not only the restrictions, demolitions, crackdowns and arrests within Gaza on behalf of the Hamas government: In addition, the uncompromising rhetoric akin to that common in IS publications is also present, likening the non-Salafi groups to tyrants and traitors, and even apostates and unbelievers. This change in behaviour in Gaza happens in parallel with the activities of IS-linked Gazans in Sinai. Whereas the ABM largely targeted Egyptian security forces, the Wilayat Sina' group is increasingly attacking Egyptian Christian civilians, other civilians and Israeli targets. Furthermore, the frequency of attacks of all kinds rose substantially after the ABM pledge of allegiance to IS.<sup>204</sup>

### **Why this development now? -A new safe haven in the Sinai for Gaza's Jihadis?**

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<sup>204</sup> Gilkes, "Then Kill the Pagans Wherever You Find Them': The Emerging Trend of Islamic State Networks Targeting Christians in Egypt," 155.

While the examples of attacks against Hamas targets might be viewed as few compared to attacks against Israel and against local Christians or “purveyors of vice”, this change in target selection is significant for several reasons. Both local minorities and these “purveyors of vice” can be regarded as soft targets, and attacking them has been met with few repercussions for the perpetrators. The same may be said with regards to repercussions following rockets fired towards Israel. While rocket attacks over the border have created tense situations in Gaza, and have served as the justification for Israeli bombardments on Gazan territory, the risk of being apprehended by the Hamas authorities is minimal except when the attacks were breaking cease fires upheld by Hamas.

As such, this shift in target selection is arguably due to some form of boost in morale or ideology. The Salafi-Jihadis in Gaza have operated in a relatively low risk environment. Reports on police reluctance to thoroughly investigate crimes presumably committed by Salafi-Jihadis, and better treatment and shorter terms served in prison<sup>205</sup>, are other indicators of the odd “privilege” enjoyed by the Jihadists. Attacking Hamas personnel and property puts all this at risk, and the Jihadists themselves know very well that previous direct (and especially armed) provocations against Hamas have been responded to in turn.

So, why now? The energy of the Arab Spring shifted after the initial popular uprisings, and Hamas was not able to frame the narrative of the Arab Spring as an “extension” of the Palestinian liberation cause.<sup>206</sup> Rather, developments would strengthen Salafi-jihadi narratives. The emergence of the insurgency in Sinai has facilitated the formation of a base of operation as well as strengthening the area as a safe haven for militants.<sup>207</sup> The influx of Libyan arms has strengthened the military capabilities of, as well as invigorating<sup>208</sup> the Gaza- and Sinai-based Jihadists, adding to their stockpiles both quantitatively and qualitatively, “significantly reinforc[ing] the military capacity of terrorist groups” operating in this area.<sup>209</sup> In addition, the growth and success of ISIS in general, and IS’ emerging physical presence in the Sinai in particular, seem to have emboldened substantial parts of the Gazan Jihadi scene, presumably encouraging the more uncompromising tendencies of Gazan Jihadi groups. To

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<sup>205</sup> Brenner, “The Deradicalization of Islamists by Islamists.”

<sup>206</sup> Milton-Edwards, “Hamas and the Arab Spring: Strategic Shifts?”

<sup>207</sup> The dynamic of jihadists using Sinai to escape crackdowns by Hamas is known from before the Arab Spring as well, see Sabry, 106-107.

<sup>208</sup> Sabry, *Sinai*, 81.

<sup>209</sup> Marsh, “Brothers Came Back with Weapons: The Effects of Arms Proliferation from Libya,” 81.

paraphrase the young Palestinian spokesperson in the recent Wilayat Sina' video, it is emboldening them to go "from words to action".<sup>210</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The tendency of Gazan Salafi-Jihadi groups to criticize Hamas through their speeches, communiqués or actions is not new, and well predates the Arab Spring. Salafi-Jihadism in the Gaza Strip is a phenomenon that occurred before the Hamas' takeover of control of Gaza in June 2007. However, the tensions between Fatah and Hamas, and Hamas' participation in the Palestinian Legislative Council election in 2006 caused not only criticism, but also more dissent within Hamas' own ranks towards Salafi-Jihadi groups. The analyses discussed here suggest a loose, slumbering, "deterred but determined" network of scattered, small groups. While none of the Salafi-Jihadi groups are able to match Hamas militarily, the groups do challenge Hamas ideologically. Hamas was, and still is, an organization with deep roots in Palestinian society with a large popular base, and extensive funding from abroad, something which the Salafi-Jihadi groups lack.

We have seen that while some of the groups who have claimed one or a handful of attacks have disappeared, others have reorganized, splintered, and merged. Their numbers are never certain, but almost always low if we consider the conservative estimates. Always outnumbered and outgunned, the Salafi-Jihadi groups in Gaza or of Gazan origin have largely been careful to show that they are critical of the "soft stance" of Hamas with regards to fighting the enemy, their enforcing of Islamic law, and their public stances on democracy and their participation in it, a lenience that did not end with the Arab Spring.<sup>211</sup> Almost just as careful has the majority of the groups been when it came to challenging Hamas militarily, the latter being the Jihadists' weakest point. However, in light of the seemingly recent shift in target selection towards local and governmental targets, one may argue that Hamas' authority has increasingly been challenged by Salafi Jihadi groups also in the military field.

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<sup>210</sup> The Islamic State, Wilayat Sina', *Millat Ibrahim*. 19:06. "[...] naḥnu l-yawm, taṣdīqan li-l-'aqwāli bil-'af'āl." ("We are today true to making words into action").

<sup>211</sup> Tuastad, "Hamas-PLO Relations Before and After the Arab Spring."

The string of uprisings in the Arab world beginning in early 2011 seems to have accentuated already existing grievances between the Salafi-Jihadi movement and their non-Salafi counterparts in Gaza. Even when recognizing the difficulties in studying this movement, we may argue that any substantial growth in numbers inside of Gaza does not seem to have materialized, and the archetypical Gazan Salafi-Jihadi fighter appears largely unchanged. However, developments in Syria/Iraq, Libya and Egypt has changed the conditions to such a degree, that it seem the *modus operandi* of some of the groups has changed, in part visible in the groups' rhetoric, but manifestly so in their target selection.

In the past, when Jund Ansar Allah in 2009 not only criticized Hamas, but declared an Emirate in Palestine, it was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of Hamas rule. Arguably, however, when doing so they did not target Hamas militarily. This has changed in later years.

The January 2018 video published by Wilayat Sina' illustrates this. This group "declared war" on Hamas, illustrated the target selection by murdering a Hamas associate, and placed Hamas in line with Israel and Fatah in their enemy hierarchy.

I have argued that the Arab Spring was instrumental in this development by opening a theatre for enhancing of existing connections between Gazan and Egyptian extremists, the access to Gaza –and crucially– to Sinai, of Libyan weapons, and a possible emboldening of Salafi-Jihadis due to the success of al-Qaida inspired groups, especially the IS in the context of the Syrian civil war. The emergence of the IS is one factor explaining *why* these Gazan Jihadi elements changed their target selection. However, as there has been no lack of incentive to target Hamas as a "near enemy", as Jihadist statements continually have shown, there has been a lack of opportunity to do so until recently. As such, the fact that the armed activity directed towards Hamas has largely originated from groups connected to and/or situated in Sinai serves to explain *how* they have been able to remedy this lack of opportunity.

I believe that we see the enemy hierarchy presented in Salafi-Jihadi statements after the Arab Spring to echo those from the pre 2011-period. Thus, even though the sources studied for this thesis seem to suggest that some dimensions of the Salafi-Jihadi groups have remained unchanged in essence; some of these groups' enemy hierarchies have nevertheless been realized in their target selection of a hitherto unprecedented level.

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