

THE PALESTINIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD: TRUE RELIGIOUS TERRORISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Some terrorism experts argue that Muslim extremist terrorists who justify their violence by invoking Islamic fundamentalism are actually using religion to hide underlying political and economic motivations. In this view, there is no such thing as “religious terrorism,” only terrorists who use religion as a shield for political violence. This paper questions this assertion by examining the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a small, radical, and violent terrorist group involved in the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. The PIJ’s extreme violence and uncompromisingly hard-line attitude toward the conflict only makes sense when one considers the group as true believers in Islamic fundamentalist extremism, making the group an example of truly religious terrorism.

It is often argued that religious terrorism—a form of terrorism that claims to be inspired by religious beliefs and seeks a religious objective—is actually motivated primarily by political objectives that are simply couched in religious terms. According to this line of argument, religion is used by terrorist groups to justify their acts of violence and gain sympathy and support, concealing the deeper political or economic goals that actually drive their “religious” terrorism. Thus, in the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Palestinian terrorist groups, such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad that wreak terrorist violence on Israel in the name of religious jihad, are hiding deeper political objectives behind the religion of Islam, and their terrorism is not actually religious but secular in nature.

Many scholars contend that “to treat Islamic terrorism as the consequence of political and socioeconomic factors alone would not do justice to the significance of the religious culture in which this phenomenon is rooted and nurtured” and “it is necessary to understand the religious-ideological factors—which are deeply embedded in Islam.”¹ This paper will question the assertion that

1 Bar, Shmuel. “The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism.”

religion is generally not the true motivation for religious terrorism by examining one specific group—the small, radical, and extremely violent Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Since the time of its founding in the 1980s, the militantly religious Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) has called for a *jihad* (holy war) against the state of Israel in order to liberate and restore the state of Palestine. The PIJ has continuously justified its objectives and violent methods with fundamentalist Islamic rhetoric, and I will argue that the group’s religious justifications are not hiding deeper political motives, but rather demonstrate true religious radicalism and a dedication to militant Islam. In this paper, I will more fully explore the innate and ongoing religiosity of the PIJ, beginning with the group’s founding in the 1980s and the development of its radical ideology. I will next explain how religion has affected the group’s development over the ensuing decades, especially its frequent and self-publicized use of suicide bombing attacks against Israeli civilians. Finally, I will compare the PIJ’s current state with other Palestinian groups, arguing that the unwavering religious fundamentalism of the group is responsible for its lack of political power and limited popular support and demonstrates its genuine dedication to militant Islam.

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad emerged in 1979-1980 as a radical offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a worldwide Islamist movement dedicated to the restoration of the Islamic faith and the creation of a unified pan-Arab empire. The PIJ distinguished itself from the Muslim Brotherhood by its commitment to the immediate liberation of Palestine, to be accomplished by the violent destruction of the state of Israel by means of a *jihad*, launched by the members of the PIJ. With this objective in hand, the group quickly emerged as one of the most violent and militantly Islamist Palestinian nationalist groups involved in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Since the 1980s, the group has been responsible for more than 40 terrorist attacks against the Israeli people and the deaths of over 100 Israelis, the majority civilians.² The PIJ utilizes such methods as car bombs, rockets and suicide bombings, with university students, women, and children often serving as bombers. The group has been linked to the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah and receives funding and other support from the governments of Iran and Syria. Unlike the ideologically similar Hamas, another Palestinian terrorist group, the PIJ has not developed social programs for the Palestinian people nor become involved in the Palestinian political scene. Instead, the PIJ remains a small and rather secretive group focused almost exclusively on acts of violence against Israel and the propagation of its militant Islamist belief.³

Religion has been the primary motivating force for the Palestinian

2 Mitnick, Joshua. “Islamic Jihad steps out from Hamas shadow.”

3 MIPT. “Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”

Islamic Jihad throughout its history. The group's founders were originally members of the more mainstream Muslim Brotherhood, which held that Muslims must first look inward and revitalize their devotion to Islam before dealing with external issues such as the destruction of Israel, the liberation of Palestine, and ultimately, the unification of the Muslim world under a single Islamic empire.⁴ Dr. Fathi Shaqaqi, the PIJ's first leader, and Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Awda, both Palestinian activists who had attended Zaqaziq University in Egypt, located at the heart of the radical Islamist movement, had grown impatient with the moderate, gradual approach of the Muslim Brotherhood in regard to the liberation of Palestine.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979, in which the Shia Islamic revolution of the Iranian people resulted in the overthrow of the secular, Western-supported Shah of Iran and his replacement with the religious government of the Ayatollah Khomeini, provided the catalyst for the men's separation from the Brotherhood and their development of the ideology of the PIJ.⁵ To Shaqaqi and al-Aziz Awda, the Iranian Revolution was "a major victory in the struggle against western attempts to exclude Islam from politics, and was uniquely successful in establishing a state founded on Islamic law."⁶

What most impressed the two men about the Iranian Revolution was that the revolt of the Iranian people, united by their common Islamic faith, had resulted in the creation of a *religious* government in Iran, based on the teachings of Islam and the word of the Koran, the sacred book of Islam. To Shaqaqi and al-Aziz Awda, the revolution's success was proof that immediate revolutionary action by devout Muslims was required to overthrow the non-Muslim regimes impeding the establishment of a pure, Islamic state. Violent revolution had won the day in Iran, wresting control of that country from a secular, western-backed regime. In Palestine, as well, the men believed that violent protest would succeed where moderation and diplomacy had not.

These conclusions formed the basis of the PIJ's ideology, a blend of extreme Palestinian nationalism and anti-Israeli rhetoric grounded firmly in religion. The group's primary objectives are the destruction of Israel, which it sees as a godless and illegitimate state, and the liberation of Palestine "from the river to the sea."⁷ The group's ideology and actions are justified by its founders and leaders using the teachings of Islam. In the Islamic faith, the Koran is seen as the literal and inerrant word of God, as revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Islamic fundamentalism is a complicated and controversial term whose

4 Litvak, Meir. "The Palestinian Islamic Jihad."

5 *Ibid*

6 *Ibid*

7 Donovan, Dr. Michael. "Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)."

exact meaning is much-debated, but in general Islamic fundamentalists are those Muslims who believe that the Koran provides directives for all aspects of Muslim life, from religion to law to medicine to politics, and that “God’s law,” as recorded in the Koran, supplants all man-made laws.⁸ This is the belief taken by the PIJ, which seeks a Palestinian state ruled by religion. In traditional as well as fundamentalist Islam, “there is no separation between the political and religious. Islam is, in essence, both religion and regime and no area of human activity is outside its remit.”⁹ Relying on this concept, the PIJ asserts that the liberated state of Palestine is to be ruled by religious clerics in the manner of Khomeini’s Islamic regime in Iran. This is the only legitimate form of government, because only by following the religion of Islam can one hope to live correctly, according to God’s will.¹⁰

The other main aspect of the group’s ideology, the attack and destruction of Israel, is also explained using Islamic fundamentalism. According to the PIJ, the Israeli people must be destroyed, not for the political reason that they are occupying land claimed by Palestine, but because they are *infidels*, the enemies of God. To Islamic fundamentalists like the founders of the PIJ, “Israel, by its very existence, was a source of moral and spiritual corruption that prevented the Muslims from remedying the malaise of their society.”¹¹ The primary threat from Israel is religious, not political: the Israeli people are presumed to be responsible for the spiritual decline of Muslim society that has resulted in the current dominance of Western, secular powers. The PIJ’s leaders look to the Koran to explain what must be done. The group’s followers should “strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and be unyielding to them.”¹² The Koran demands of all able-bodied Muslims, “Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Apostle have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth...until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection.”¹³ With religion, the PIJ justified the creation of a religious Palestinian state and the persecution and killing of the people of Israel, whom they see as the enemies of God.

The teachings of Islam are also used by the PIJ to justify its violent methods. The PIJ describes its actions as acts of *jihād*, an Islamic word found in the Koran that literally means “struggle.” Islamic

8 Bruinessen, Martin van. “Muslim Fundamentalism:

Something to be Understood or to be Explained Away?”

9 Bar, Shmuel. “The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism.”

10 Oreck, Alden. “Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”

11 Bar, Shmuel. “The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism.”

12 Koran 9.73, cited in Sherman, “Just What is an Islamic Jihad?”

13 Koran 9.29, cited in Sherman, “Just What is an Islamic Jihad?”

scholars point to the existence of two forms of jihad in the Koran: inner, or greater jihad, which is a struggle against one's own sins and the forces of temptation, and outer, or lesser jihad, the militant form of the word meaning to fight against the enemies of Islam.¹⁴ In most interpretations of the Koran, outer jihad is far less important than one's inner struggle with oneself in the name of faith. However, the PIJ's leaders have successfully used the principle of outward jihad to justify acts of violence against Israelis, including suicide bombings and rocket attacks against Israeli civilians in public places like bus stops, shopping malls, and restaurants. The group claims the Koran enjoins all able-bodied Muslims to fight in defense of their religion: "Allah hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight with their goods and persons than to those who sit."¹⁵ According to the radical members of the PIJ, "jihad is, by definition, an act of faith in Allah," a demonstration of the purity and depth of one's faith.¹⁶ The Israelis, as a hostile occupying force threatening the destruction of Palestine, are legitimate targets for holy jihadist violence, according to the ideology of the PIJ.

Suicide bombing is often seen as one of the most disturbing aspects of Islamic terrorism. The PIJ has utilized suicide bombings since 1984 and is among the most radical of groups that practice suicide attacks. The group openly claims responsibility for terrorist attacks, regularly recruits female suicide bombers and is known to have utilized children under the age of 18 as bombers.¹⁷ These practices are by no means common, even among other terrorist groups. Again, the explanation for this extreme and radical violence is founded in the group's religiosity. The group, and other radical Islamic groups like Hamas and al Qaeda, regards death in the name of Islam as a form of martyrdom, the highest honor a Muslim can achieve. Fathi Shaqaqi, the group's founder and leader, described suicide attacks in 1988 as "exceptional" acts "for religion and jihad...to destroy the morale of the enemy and plant terror into the people."¹⁸ By sacrificing oneself for the good of Islam and destroying as many of the enemy as possible, the suicide bomber is helping Palestine and ensuring himself an honored place in heaven.¹⁹ Interviews with potential suicide bombers have revealed that these individuals are almost always motivated by religious goals more than by political goals. One interview with a 20-year-old

14 Streusand, Douglas E. "What Does Jihad Mean?"

15 Koran 4.95, cited in Sherman, "Just What is an Islamic Jihad?"

16 Litvak, Meir. "The Palestinian Islamic Jihad."

17 Fighel, Yoni. "Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Female Suicide Bombers."

18 Stork, Joe. "Erased in a Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians."

19 *Ibid.*

prospective bomber revealed that he “fights first for Islam, second to become a ‘martyr’ and win acceptance into heaven, and only third for control of his country.”²⁰ The ranking of religion over politics by suicide bombers is widely corroborated in other studies and interviews. The Koran and its religious teachings are invoked as justifications for suicide bombing terrorist attacks. According to the same potential martyr, “The Koran says it is the duty of Muslims to bring terror to the enemy, so being a terrorist makes me a good Muslim.”²¹ For the PIJ, as well, engaging in terrorism against perceived enemies of Islam makes one a good Muslim. The members of the group see themselves as the leaders of a “revolutionary vanguard,” sacrificing their lives to inspire pan-Arab revolution and secure the freedom of Palestine, all in the name of Allah.²²

Those who see religion as a tool implemented by terrorists to hide the true political nature of their violence and gain popular support will claim that the PIJ is simply another group manipulating religion for its own ends. However, examining the PIJ’s position in Palestinian society today reveals that the group’s radical religious views have not helped it gain greater support; they have, on the contrary, limited the size and effectiveness of the PIJ in Palestine. This can best be seen by a comparison of the PIJ with another Palestinian terrorist group, Hamas, which was founded five years after the PIJ with similar methods and objectives. Like the PIJ, Hamas seeks the creation of an Islamic Palestinian state and rejects the legitimacy of Israel. It has been designated a terrorist group by both the United States and the European Union for its use of suicide bombings and other terrorist violence over the years.²³ Unlike the PIJ, however, Hamas has changed over time, modifying its structure to include separate political and military wings and diversifying its focus to include social programs for the Palestinian people. These changes represent efforts by Hamas to gain greater popular support among Palestinians and to gain legitimacy as a political entity, and resulted in the group’s 2006 electoral victory as Palestine’s majority party.²⁴ Hamas has been willing to modify its religious stance in exchange for greater popular support and political power.

Among Palestinian nationalist groups, the PIJ has one of the smallest memberships and support bases, with an estimated 100 members and only several thousand supporters among a population of over nine million Palestinians. It is widely seen, inside and outside of Palestine, as a violent extremist group espousing a radical form of Islam not practiced

20 Ghosh, Aparisim. “Inside the Mind of an Iraqi Suicide Bomber.”

21 *Ibid.*

22 Oreck, Alden. “Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”

23 MIPT. “Hamas.”

24 *Ibid.*

by a majority of Muslims. By contrast, while Hamas remains an Islamic terrorist group, by separating its military wing (responsible for terrorist violence) and its political wing (which holds seats in the government), Hamas has successfully become a mainstream group widely accepted in Palestinian society. The group's development of charities and social programs to reduce unemployment and improve education has greatly increased its support base among Palestinians to the extent that it has surpassed the more moderate and secular political group Fatah as the majority party in the Palestinian parliament.²⁵

According to Mordechai Kedar, "Hamas has a much wider world view... The Islamic Jihad doesn't bother with all those issues of social work, welfare, clinics, and food. They only care about the jihad, and everything else will be dealt with afterward."²⁶ Hamas's modifications in structure and expressed goals have given it more power, yet the PIJ has not followed suit. This refusal to diversify or to moderate its extremism—even if only superficially—demonstrates that the PIJ is truly dedicated to its radical program. Its religious extremism is not a public relations tool to make it more popular among Palestinians; this extremism has in fact limited its membership and as a result Hamas, a newer group, has gained greater popular support. Where it could follow Hamas's example and create social programs to appeal to Palestine's many impoverished people who require food more than calls to holy war, the PIJ maintains violent jihad as its sole focus and because of this remains a marginal group among the Palestinian people.

Its religious views have also limited the PIJ's political power and ability to influence the Palestinian government. By distancing the militant terrorist wing from the political wing, Hamas has gained an increasingly powerful role in the Palestinian government. It has shown that it will compromise its desire for an Islamic regime in Palestine, and instead, will take part in the current Western-style, popularly-elected government in Palestine. This demonstrates a terrorist group modifying its religious tendencies for pragmatic concerns. The PIJ, however, maintains its open dedication to terrorist violence, even though this view has been demonstratively unpopular among the Palestinian people. The religious-based concept of liberating Palestine through a holy jihad against the Israelis and of inspiring all Palestinians to join this violent campaign in the name of Islam, is central to the PIJ, yet is so radical that it has kept the group marginalized. The PIJ will not abandon this ideology, though, because it truly believes in militant jihad.

The PIJ wants no part of the current Palestinian government, despite the firsthand example from Hamas that political involvement can increase the power it wields in world affairs. The group maintains

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Mitnick, Joshua. "Islamic Jihad steps out from Hamas shadow."

that the only acceptable and legitimate form of government is one ruled by Islamic religious clerics, and even for strategic reasons will not participate in secular government.²⁷ Thus the PIJ's religious ideas actually limit its political power. This is yet another example of religion limiting the scope of the group's power, but the PIJ will not modify its religious concepts because it truly believes them.

It cannot be said that the PIJ is manipulating religion to further its goals and its position in Palestinian society because the group's radical religious beliefs are actually limiting its support and the scope of its influence. Small, radical, and extremely violent, the PIJ is all of these because it is truly dedicated to the triumph of militant Islam over secular, non-Muslim forces. Its terrorist violence is part of this strategy—a campaign of violent jihad to destroy non-Muslim corrupting influences on Palestine and to inspire a pan-Arab revolution in the name of Islam. Its radical beliefs have not made the PIJ popular; despite existing for more than two decades, a longer time than Hamas, it has a smaller and extremely limited support base. Because it is so extremist in its interpretation of Islam, it does not appeal to most Palestinians. Yet the group persists in openly promoting the destruction of Israel by implementing terrorist attacks—against Israeli men, women, and children—and proclaiming the need to unite religion and politics in a fundamentalist Islamic regime. These religious-based beliefs have limited the group's membership, curtailed its political power, and prevented it from having a truly influential role in mainstream Palestinian society.

Religion is not a strategy of the PIJ to gain support and legitimize its actions; the group's radical Islamic beliefs have actually marginalized it among Palestinians. It is one of the most obvious terrorist groups among Palestinian nationalist organizations, because it does not try to hide its terrorist violence. The PIJ is an example of a religious terrorist group that is truly motivated by its religious beliefs and is not using merely them for tactical purposes. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad is composed of men and women who believe in radical Islam and in the use of violence to defend religion, and for this reason, it represents a unique threat among terrorist groups operating today.

27 Donovan, Dr. Michael. "Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)."

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