WHAT IS HAMAS?

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“Hamas” is an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya—the Islamic Resistance Movement. Hamas is a Palestinian nationalist political party and militant group, an Islamist organization, the de facto government of the Gaza Strip, and a terror organization—recognized as such by the United States, the European Union, and other governments—because it explicitly seeks to kill, harm, and commit atrocities against civilians.

Hamas seeks to establish an Islamic regime throughout historic Palestine—including Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

The Origins of Hamas

In 1987, amid the First Intifada (a violent popular Palestinian uprising against Israel), Hamas was founded as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. Through preaching, charity, and militant activities, Yassin had emerged as a prominent figure in Israeli-occupied Gaza. Initially, Israel had tolerated and even supported the growth of Palestinian Islamist activity associated with the Brotherhood, as it was seen as a relatively non-threatening counterweight to the Palestine Liberation Organization.

But this strategy proved misguided, as Yassin leveraged this Muslim Brotherhood offshoot to mobilize support for armed resistance against Israel. Hamas quickly gained in popularity and began carrying out violent attacks—targeting Israeli military and civilians alike.

Vision and Aspirations

Published in 1988, the Hamas charter calls for the entire land of Palestine to be an Islamic state under Shari’a law. It rejects diplomacy in favor of religious war against not only Israel, but Jews as a people. It makes references to the notorious antisemitic tome Protocols of the Elders of Zion and explicitly incites violence against Jews, as Hamas leaders continue to do to this day.

Hamas’ vision of a “liberated” Palestine is one without Jews.

Spoiling the Peace Process, Driving the Second Intifada

During the Oslo peace process of the 1990s, as Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization made historic strides to resolve the conflict and advance the goal of Palestinian statehood, Hamas initiated a wave of devastating terror attacks against Israeli civilians in an effort to scuttle the ongoing negotiations. Hamas’ fatal shooting attacks and suicide bombings sowed fear and doubt among Israelis and undermined Israeli support for the peace process.

With the failure of final-status talks in 2000, Hamas capitalized on popular discontent and resentment toward Israel's enduring occupation by stepping up its terror attacks and driving the bloody Second Intifada (2000-2005). Palestinian terrorists blew up buses and restaurants in suicide bombings, shot at Israelis on the streets, and cemented Israelis’ deep mistrust in Palestinians’ willingness to accept their basic humanity. During this period, Hamas and other terrorists killed over 1,000 Israelis and over 2,000 Palestinians were also killed in clashes with Israeli forces.

Hamas in Palestinian Politics

Through its zealous commitment to armed resistance, Hamas garnered widespread public support from Palestinians disillusioned with the more conciliatory approach of the secular Fatah movement, the party of PLO Chairman and PA President Yasser Arafat and his successor, Mahmoud Abbas.

While Hamas boycotted the last PA presidential elections in 2005, it emerged victorious from the PA’s parliamentary elections the subsequent year, a development that shocked international observers and undermined efforts to restart the peace process.
Hamas Seizes Gaza

After a year of civil unrest and heightened tensions between Fatah and Hamas, in June 2007 Hamas initiated a takeover of the Gaza Strip (from which Israel had fully disengaged in 2005) and seized full control of all institutions, expelling and killing Fatah officials.

With Gaza now ruled by a militant organization that regularly launched rockets at Israeli cities and carried out lethal violent provocations, Israel and Egypt enforced a blockade of the Strip and restricted the flow of goods and people in and out.

Under the Hamas Regime

From 2007 onward, Hamas has maintained an authoritarian, Islamist regime in Gaza. Palestinians in Gaza lack basic freedoms and Hamas brutally represses dissenting voices. Cut off from the global economy and largely blocked from leaving the Strip by Israel and Egypt, Gaza residents face shortages of basic necessities including water and electricity. Hamas invests tremendously in militant infrastructure and building an extensive subterranean tunnel network, including under the borders with Egypt and Israel. To do so, it diverts international humanitarian aid and essential resources that could otherwise be used to attend to the basic needs of the Strip’s more than two million residents.

In addition to its governing authorities and military apparatus in Gaza and militant cells in the West Bank, Hamas maintains a political bureau abroad that in theory serves as the organization’s top decision-making body. Hamas has offices in Qatar and Turkey and maintains close diplomatic ties with Iran, from which it receives substantial funding.

Hamas and Israel

Hamas and Israel have remained in a protracted state of conflict since the organization seized Gaza. The past 16 years have seen several rounds of armed conflict that typically began with Hamas launching rockets at Israeli cities, to which Israel would respond with airstrikes against militant infrastructure in Gaza. But until October 2023, these armed conflicts always ended in ceasefires that maintained Hamas in power.

Israel came to view Hamas as a threat that could be managed by periodically curbing its military capabilities and re-establishing deterrence. Simultaneously, Israel attempted to incentivize quiet from Hamas with economic carrots, including allowing suitcases of cash from Qatar to enter Gaza and later issuing permits for Gazans to enter Israel for work.

October 7

October 7 upended this paradigm. Hamas’ capture of more than 200 hostages and brutal massacre of 1,400 Israelis shattered the assumption that the organization would prioritize its rule in Gaza over its genocidal intentions. The ongoing war against Hamas is unlike any other; for the first time, Israel has determined that the long-term cost of living alongside Hamas is greater than the cost of destroying it.

Hamas leaders have since stressed their desire to repeat October 7—to continually massacre Israelis—until their aspirations are realized.

Understanding Hamas’ Endgame

Israel may succeed in ending Hamas’ regime and dismantling the lethal threats posed by militants in Gaza. But the organization will surely live on—through its political leadership abroad, its isolated terror cells throughout the region, and its enduring resonance on the Palestinian street.

Hamas carried out the October 7 attacks knowing that they would prompt Israel to enter Gaza because its aspirations transcend the narrow confines of the Strip. Hamas is willing to pay a high price for this war in order to escalate the conflict’s stakes, boost the organization’s profile as a champion of the Palestinian cause, and mobilize Arab and international public opinion against Israel.

The organization has clearly made the calculation that sacrificing its control over Gaza will serve its long-term goal: an Islamist regime from the river to the sea, for Palestinians alone.